

Level 4 Human in a Ruined World #Chapter 371 - Read

Level 4 Human in a Ruined World Chapter 371

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Chapter 371: Cold But Warm (1)

"The universe? Is there an achievement tied to the universe?"

Yeongwoo widened his eyes in surprise.

[Achievement Unlocked: Cold but Warm]

| Achievement Grade: Universe

| Achievement Rank: #841

「Created over 10 million points of goodwill while possessing over 200 million points of evil karma.」

It was the first time since the reset that Yeongwoo had ever seen the "Universe" achievement tier.

‘I’ve finally reached the universe itself...!’

Indeed, there was no other way to interpret it.

The fact that the rank of this achievement was measured on a universal scale was proof enough.

Yeongwoo07’s actions and accomplishments were no longer just planetary; they had now transcended to be evaluated on a cosmic level.

‘Rank #841... That means there are 840 others ahead of me who have unlocked this achievement?’

At first glance, that seemed like a lot.

But upon closer thought, it wasn’t so at all.

The universe.

This was an achievement that spanned the entirety of the universe, no less.

‘Wait, hang on. Does that mean only 840 people in this entire universe have managed to generate over 10 million points of good karma while holding over 200 million points of evil karma?’

That implied that those with evil karma in the hundreds of millions were largely irredeemable scum.

‘So, I was right, wasn't I...?’

Yeongwoo shot Aldo a glance that screamed, ‘See, I told you so!’

But he couldn't bring himself to say it aloud.

While it was true that most of the heavily sinful were indeed evil, this achievement also indicated that there were 840 others who were "Cold but Warm."

Aldo saw their existence as proof enough of what he had been saying.

Virtuous individuals, after all, were rare beings.

And now, even Yeongwoo, inadvertently, had his name added to the list of those rare individuals in the universe.

‘Still, the existence of this achievement is amusing. Couldn't they just create an ‘Ultimate Evil’ achievement for us sinners instead?’

A strange feeling washed over him.

Could this really be the "balance of the universe" that Aldo had been talking about?

Regardless, the very existence of such an achievement suggested that the universe encouraged "Cold but Warm" actions.

In other words, reforming oneself.

‘Then... is there a next-tier achievement? Usually, these things are part of a series, right?’

Perhaps there were other tiers, such as having 40 million points of good karma with 200 million points of evil karma or 50 million points of good karma with 500 million points of evil karma.

If there were, Yeongwoo was willing to force himself to accumulate more evil karma or good karma to reach them.

‘You never know.’

With a glimmer of unreasonable hope, Yeongwoo opened the achievement window.

To his surprise, there was indeed a new entry added.

[Burning Ice]

| Ensure that your total points of evil karma do not exceed twice your points of good karma.

"What...?"

Yeongwoo's eyes grew wide in disbelief.

It really existed—a sequel to the so-called "Reform Achievement."

‘What does this even mean? ‘Ensure that your total points of evil karma do not exceed twice your points of good karma’...?’

He blinked rapidly.

In simple terms, it meant he had to decrease his evil karma accumulation and increase his good karma points.

With his current evil karma points at 200 million, achieving the "Burning Ice" achievement would require at least 100 million good karma points.

If his evil karma points continued to grow, completing "Burning Ice" would become forever impossible.

‘And they don’t even show me exactly how many good karma points I currently have?’

This was undoubtedly intentional.

Unlike previous achievements, which provided a clear progress indicator, this one offered no such convenience.

In other words, it was telling him to stop overthinking and commit to pure, uncalculating acts of good karma.

‘What do they take me for? Do they think I’m the kind of pushover who’d suddenly start being nice just because they told me to?’

Yeongwoo silently fumed, but his anger didn’t last long.

[You have unclaimed achievement rewards.]

A flashing notification at the bottom of the achievement window caught his eye.

‘Hmm. Well, I should at least check the reward.’

What would the universe grant as a reward for performing such a "Cold but Warm" deed in this desolate cosmos?

Ting!

When Yeongwoo claimed the reward, a brilliant light flickered before his eyes, revealing the tooltip for a new piece of equipment.

「Precious Heart」 - Legendary Necklace

【The higher your ratio of good karma points, the greater your damage reduction—ranging from a minimum of 10% to a maximum of 30%.】

"What the..."

As expected of an item with absurd acquisition conditions, its effects were just as outrageous.

‘Damage reduction based on good karma point ratio?’

Even the minimum 10% reduction made the item worthwhile, but the maximum effect of 30% was unprecedented for defensive equipment.

‘A perfect fit for aspiring virtuous individuals. Instead of boosting attack power, it provides damage reduction based on good karma points...’

Yet, it was also incredibly useful for Yeongwoo, whose offensive capabilities were already top-notch.

‘Then what’s next? Will the next item make virtuous individuals invincible?’

Having seen the reward for this achievement, Yeongwoo couldn’t help but turn his gaze toward the next-tier achievement.

[Burning Ice]

| Ensure that your total points of evil karma do not exceed twice your points of good karma.

If he completed this achievement as well, wouldn't it grant even better rewards than the current one?

Likely another defensive item.

And for Yeongwoo, who had no qualms about beating up even government officials, stocking up on defensive gear was a priority.

Ironically, however, obtaining such gear required...

‘...A massive amount of good karma points.’

For the violence-filled business ahead—

In other words, for future acts of sin, he first needed acts of good karma.

"..."

When Yeongwoo silently turned to the three virtuous individuals nearby, Aldo, who had been watching him, nervously asked:

-W-What's wrong, Yeongwoo?

"Goodwill."

-...Pardon?

"I need to accumulate good karma. What kinds of virtuous acts can I perform in this Ascension Arena?"

-All of a sudden...?

Though puzzled, Aldo quickly straightened his expression.

After all, if this top-tier villain decided to do good, he couldn't help but welcome the idea.

-That's an excellent decision! There are plenty of ways to earn good karma!

He glanced at the world map floating above them.

-For example, simply persuading other challengers who come to challenge you to leave peacefully could count as a virtuous act.

"Really?"

-Yes! Normally, you'd have to duel them, but altering the outcome in a positive way should qualify as good karma in the system's eyes.

"Oh, so the system determines what counts as good karma or evil karma?"

-Exactly! That's my understanding!

"Huh... Then if I could convince the system itself, I could commit evil karma and still have it count as good karma."

When Yeongwoo muttered this to himself, Amana, who was standing nearby, looked utterly stunned.

-W-What did you just say...?

"Ah, just kidding. Just kidding."

With a wicked smile, Yeongwoo looked up at the world map.

The symbols for Squad 042 and Squad 029, who had been thoroughly humiliated earlier, were retreating as far away as possible from the central region.

Meanwhile, the second-ranked Squad 004 was rapidly approaching.

The other squads were also heading toward the central region, albeit cautiously judging by their slow-moving markers.

Among them were groups who likely approached with peaceful intentions, as the virtuous individuals had suggested.

'So, should I start by greeting Squad 004?'

Yeongwoo scratched his chin.

At that moment, a marker for Team 004 on the world map moved rapidly toward their location.

Finally, they had decided to make their move.

"Everyone, be careful. The strongest ones in this promotion field are coming,"

Yeongwoo said, raising his guard with the Aratubank.

Without a word, Amana and the other three aliens hid behind Yeongwoo's Aratubank.

-Team 004... could it be...?

“Yes, second overall. Besides us, they’re the only ones in the promotion field ranked high in both score and power.”

From a different perspective, if not for Team 023, Team 004 could have claimed the throne in this promotion battle.

That’s why Team 004 was coming—to verify whether Team 023 was truly as strong as the rumors suggested.

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‘These bastards have both power and luck. Of all times, they had to come when I’m forced into aliens work.’

Yeongwoo grimaced regretfully, wrinkling his nose.

At that moment, a sharp presence was felt from afar.

Swoosh!

“Attack!”

Boom!

A strong vibration struck the surface of the Aratubank.

Peeking out to inspect, Yeongwoo saw a purple arrow embedded in the surface dissolve into the air.

‘An elemental arrow?’

There was an archer on the other side wielding elemental abilities.

Soon, four silhouettes approached rapidly from the distance.

Unlike other teams before them, each figure was lean and agile.

“.....!”

Yeongwoo instinctively realized these were true elites.

Of course.

‘Still, isn’t the King of Promotions me? This isn’t a prison. No matter how strong they are, it’s nothing I can’t handle.’

Meanwhile, Yeongwoo’s Karma Points, so high it could land him in prison, totalled an absurd 200 million.

‘Not all karmic sinners are created equal!’

As the distance closed to a reasonable range, Yeongwoo opened his guard.

Team 004, now within 10 meters, looked visibly surprised.

-Huh, this guy.

-What’s with his equipment?

As befitting their second-place ranking, they had an eye for gear.

They widened their eyes at Yeongwoo’s armor, weapon, and shield.

The one leading them, an obsidian-skinned ogre covered in tattoos, instinctively assumed a defensive stance the moment Yeongwoo opened his guard.

They could sense an overwhelming attack was imminent.

And indeed—

Wham!

Yeongwoo reversed his grip on Bastard and struck the ogre’s chest like lightning with the pommel of the sword.

Gak!

The ogre’s black mouth opened as pale fluids spilled out.

Behind him, a panther beastman unsheathed their claws and aimed for Yeongwoo’s neck.

Swoosh!

A sharp tearing sound filled the air.

But Golden Trail flew from behind Yeongwoo, intercepting and blocking the beastman’s attack with ease.

Clang!

-Wh-what is that? The sword's moving on its own!

The beastman, now targeted by the golden streak, shouted a warning to their teammates.

But it was already too late.

The remaining two members were already being pummeled by Yeongwoo, who had stepped forward to greet them.

Thud!

「Rohm's Bottom」 - Legendary Swordsmanship

【Fight like a prisoner.】

Living up to his 200 million Karma Points, Yeongwoo wielded the techniques of prisoners and subdued Team 004 without even drawing Bastard.

Not only was his karma overwhelming, but his combat prowess was far beyond what representatives of lower-tier planets could handle.

-Y-Yeongwoo, sir...?

Aldo stumbled backward in shock at his teammate's unbelievable performance.

Even Amana, who had been composed until now, gripped her weapon tightly, fluffing her feathers.

Meanwhile, Team 004, now sprawled on the ground, could barely comprehend what had just happened.

-Wh-what just happened?

-What do you think? We lost, ridiculously fast.

-Didn't that guy not even use his sword?

In disbelief, they realized their entire team had been defeated in about ten seconds.

The ogre, who had fought Yeongwoo first, raised his head and stammered.

-W-who are you? This... this isn't the level of a promotion candidate!

Yeongwoo drove Bastard Child near the ogre's head and answered.

Thud!

"Me? If you must know, I'm from Earth's..."

Before he could finish, another team appeared in the distance.

Another group had finally stepped into the Midwest.

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The name tag above their heads read 033.

'033? Fifth in power, wasn't it?'

Yeongwoo's memory was unmatched.

He recalled seeing 033 at the bottom of the power ranking list earlier.

Waving his hand, he shouted toward them.

"Are you here to challenge for first place? Or just for a handshake?"

Team 033, seeing the defeated members of Team 004 sprawled around Yeongwoo, began retreating.

Clearly, they realized they'd made the wrong decision.

Yeongwoo frantically waved both hands and shouted again.

"Wait, wait! Gentlemen! We sell handshakes here!"

Selling handshakes.

At Yeongwoo's sudden and bizarre declaration, both the fallen Team 004 and his own teammates tilted their heads in confusion.

-Yeongwoo, sir?

-Selling handshakes? What's that supposed to mean?

-That's not part of our rules.

Yeongwoo turned to the aliens and grinned.

“There’s no rule saying we can’t sell handshakes.”

-Huh...?

-Well, technically...

Yeongwoo turned back to Team 033 and shouted once more.

“Handshakes! Team 004, 30 million! Team 023, 50 million!”

The ogre from Team 004, lying on the ground, suddenly seemed to realize something, his mouth agape.

-Wait, no! Don’t come here! If you do...

But before he could finish, Yeongwoo’s foot pressed down on his head.

Thud!

“You punk, you want to die here? Quit your nonsense and get ready to sell handshakes. Sell enough, and you might even make it into the top five.”

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Chapter 372: Cold But Warm (2)

The All-Planets Handshake Event, held in the central-western region of the promotion grounds.

Although it was a paid handshake event, it had its effects.

-Selling handshakes?

-What nonsense is this?

Suspicious eyes filled with doubt stared at him, but still, Team 033 postponed their retreat and began cautiously approaching, albeit very slowly.

In response, Yeongwoo placed even his sword on the ground and spread his arms wide.

Fwaaat!

"Handshake! Team 004, 30 million! Team 023, 50 million!"

Finally, Team 033, who had approached within about 50 meters, showed curiosity.

-W-What in the world are you talking about? 30 million, 50 million—what does that even mean?

The one speaking was a massive steel golem, seemingly the leader of Team 033.

With disproportionately massive arms compared to its torso and lower body, it brought to mind a mutated version of CEO Kim Taejoon.

"It means if you write a loan note for 30 million, you get the opportunity to shake hands with Team 004. For 50 million, you can shake hands with Team 023."

Yeongwoo gestured toward Team 004, who was sprawled on the ground.

The steel golem swallowed hard.

-You're... selling handshakes for money?

"Yes. Considering planetary promotion, it's practically a steal, isn't it?"

-But... handshakes are supposed to be free, aren't they?

The steel golem hit the nail on the head.

Yeongwoo's expression turned grim, quite unlike before.

"Free handshakes only existed until I came up with the idea of paid handshakes."

-What?!

"If you don't pay, you can't shake hands with Team 004 or Team 023."

-Th-This is absurd...

The steel golem of Team 033 seemed dumbfounded.

But Yeongwoo wasn't done yet.

"Of course, other handshakes might be free. Anyone can shake hands to gain favor or negotiate appropriately."

-Right?

"But the handshakes I'm selling—those of Team 004 and Team 023—can only be purchased with money. Do you know what this means?"

The steel golem scratched its head.

-What does it mean...?

"You're well aware, I'm sure, that ranks 2 through 5 in this promotion tournament will be determined by the number of handshakes."

-Oh.

"In other words, after wandering around the promotion grounds and shaking hands as much as possible, the deciding factor will inevitably come down to the number of paid handshakes!"

-...!

A ridiculous but logically sound statement.

Yeongwoo's theory of paid handshakes had a persuasive power that made the listener nod involuntarily.

Even if, by the end of the explanation, it left a peculiar sense of unease.

"The price may rise depending on the situation, so you'd better buy while it's cheap."

-The price could go up?

"Of course. Do you know the official price for planetary promotion set by the planetary court?"

-N-No...

"Exactly. Nobody knows, so the market price becomes the set price."

And Yeongwoo intended to determine that market price himself, right here in the promotion grounds.

-You... You're insane, aren't you?

The steel golem of Team 033 glared at Yeongwoo.

It quickly scanned its surroundings.

Because, as crazy as this person sounded, their words weren't entirely wrong.

And most importantly...

-Wait a second...

The steel golem's expression turned sly.

-The fact that the handshake is paid was decided by you, wasn't it?

"This bastard, dropping the formalities now, huh?"

Yeongwoo said this while smiling leisurely.

After all, he hadn't built up his reputation as the "Ultimate Evil of Promotion" just by stacking debts worth two billion credits in a game of slap matches.

Yeongwoo, self-proclaimed "Ultimate Evil of Promotion," had thought of more bad ideas, and faster, than anyone else in this tournament.

Which was why he immediately noticed when the golem's eyes started shifting.

'This guy's planning to take me down and offer free handshakes himself.'

And so, as Yeongwoo subtly moved his hand closer to Bastard—

"In the end, if I just take you down, everything's resolved, isn't it? I'll offer free handshakes!"

Finding a clear solution, the steel golem charged across dozens of meters, swinging the blunt weapon in its hand.

BOOM!

Its heavy footsteps contrasted with its nimble movements.

Of course, seeing this, even the skilled warriors of Team 023, as well as the members of Team 004 sprawled on the ground, quickly guessed the outcome.

Team 004, the second-place team overall, had each gone up against Yeongwoo one-on-one and lost.

Did this golem have some special trick up its sleeve?

-Kraah!

With a fierce shout, Yeongwoo swung his weapon in a diagonal arc.

A crimson streak trailed behind, slicing cleanly through the neck of the golem's weapon.

Skkrk!

"...Huh?"

The person holding the weapon realized it first, followed by the three members of Team 033 trailing behind.

Thud!

The upper part of the golem's weapon fell to the ground.

-My... my weapon?

Seeing its high-grade weapon cut like paper for the first time, the steel golem's mouth fell open.

Seizing the moment, Yeongwoo darted forward like lightning, driving a knee into its chin.

WHAM!

-Gah!

A decisive blow.

The impact this had on the remaining members of Team 033 was immense.

They now understood why Team 004 had been left sprawled across the ground.

-Wh-What is this?

-So it was this guy who subdued Team 004...

-How did he even cut that weapon?

As Team 033 stood frozen in shock, the silhouette of yet another unit began to emerge in the distance.

Upon seeing this, Yeongwoo hastily raised his hand and shouted toward the newcomers.

“Handshakes for sale! Team 023 for 50 million! Teams 004 and 033 for 30 million each!”

* * *

A Thriving Business.

Yeongwoo’s paid handshake service began selling like hotcakes, barely an hour after its debut.

The key to its popularity lay in the world map’s location marker feature.

By forcing Teams 004 and 033 into submission and turning them into handshake sellers, Yeongwoo created a spectacle on the world map that caught everyone’s attention.

In the map’s middle region, the markers for Teams 023, 004, and 033 were clustered together, neither disappearing nor moving apart.

This unusual sight piqued the curiosity of other teams, drawing them in one by one.

Once they arrived, they found themselves swept up in Yeongwoo’s “Handshake Theory” and, after some deliberation, ended up buying a handshake.

-Fine... We’ll start by buying a handshake from Team 004.

“Very well. Team 004!”

This time, the customer was Team 010.

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Yeongwoo led the members of Team 010 to stand before the members of Team 004, who were positioned neatly for optimal handshaking.

“You know how to draft a promissory note, yes? In exchange for this handshake, you owe us 30 million. The payment is due within two weeks, Earth time. If you fail to pay within this period, you’ll owe us triple the original amount.”

In other words, if Team 010 failed to deliver 30 million to Earth’s Jeong Yeongwoo⁰⁷ within two weeks, their debt would balloon to 90 million.

-...We agree.

The leader of Team 010 nodded in agreement.

Yeongwoo then lightly traced a line across the leader’s palm with his fingertip.

Swish.

A glowing symbol signifying mutual agreement appeared in the air.

Flash!

This method of verbal contract was something Yeongwoo learned for the first time during this handshake market.

Indeed, cultural exchange had its perks.

“Now, shake hands with the Team 004 member in front of you.”

Yeongwoo gestured dramatically for the teams to shake hands.

Soon, the paid handshake between Teams 004 and 010 commenced.

For the first time, a new interface appeared in the skies above the promotion field.

Beeeeep!

With a sharp signal sound, it revealed itself as none other than a new "Score Ranking" display.

「Due to the accumulation of handshake counts under the new rules, the real-time ranking board is now visible.」

The screen first unveiled the top rank, written in red letters.

「Real-time Overall 1st Place: Team 023」

Below that, the rankings for 2nd through 5th place—the "competitive tiers"—were displayed.

Ta-ta-ta-tang!

| 2nd Place: Team 004 [6 handshakes]

| 3rd Place: Team 033 [6 handshakes]

| 4th Place: Team 006 [4 handshakes]

| 5th Place: Team 026 [3 handshakes]

-Huh?

-What the...?

-Wait, the 5th-place cutoff... is just 3 handshakes?

The participants gathered in the central-western area began murmuring.

While the 2nd and 3rd places, with 6 handshakes each, seemed formidable, the 4th and 5th places required only 4 and 3 handshakes, respectively—a reachable goal.

There were seven teams gathered in this region alone.

Even excluding the team selling paid handshakes, four teams remained.

A couple of mutual handshakes and one or two paid ones could secure a spot in the rankings.

Watching the shifting dynamics, Yeongwoo couldn't help but smile meaningfully.

'Heh, the universe favors me.'

After all, the sheer number of teams flocking to this central-western area guaranteed more potential customers.

The map now showed seven teams gathered in this region, with three already in the handshake rankings.

What would other teams, upon seeing this map and leaderboard, conclude?

'There's something going on in the central-west! I don't know exactly what, but heading there could get me closer to the handshake rankings!'

Sure enough, after the rankings were revealed, teams lingering on the outskirts of the central-west began heading toward the handshake venue en masse.

The real sales of paid handshakes were just beginning.

Taking a deep breath and savoring the "scent of money" in the air, Yeongwoo was interrupted by Aldo, who approached cautiously.

-Y-Yeongwoo....

"Yes, Your Highness? What's on your mind?"

-Aren't too many teams gathering here?

"Too many? That's a good thing, isn't it?"

Of course, it was only good for Yeongwoo.

The proceeds from this handshake event would go straight into his pocket.

But Aldo, ever the cautious royal, wasn't concerned about mere profits.

-Like what happened with Team 033 earlier... someone might decide they don't need to pay. After all, even you, Yeongwoo, can't face dozens of teams alone, can you? If that many gather here at once...

His unspoken question was clear: wasn't this situation risking not just the business but Yeongwoo's life itself?

At last, Prince Aldo had begun thinking like a true strategist.

"Hah, Your Highness! That's exactly the mindset you need to survive long-term!"

Grinning widely, Yeongwoo gripped Aldo's shoulders firmly.

Clasp!

Then, flashing a rare benevolent smile, he murmured quietly.

"In the unlikely event dozens of teams attack at once, we'll just bombard them from above. Don't worry."

-E-excuse me? Bombard them?

"Don't fret. I'll protect you with Aratubank."

Turning away, Yeongwoo fixed his gaze on the silhouettes of more teams approaching from the outskirts.

Finally, those hesitant teams had decided to step into the handshake venue.

Now, as long as he sold handshakes well, Yeongwoo was confident he'd leave this promotion field with a hefty profit and return to Earth.

"Handshakes... no, planetary promotions for sale! Team 023, 100 million! The rest, 50 million!"

Then, pointing a blade toward the remaining teams already present, he declared:

"You too—get down here. Now."

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Chapter 373: Cold But Warm (3)

-Sa... It's beyond imagination.

Golem Taru of the 023rd Team scratched his forehead.

He was witnessing something that defied all his common sense—a scene unfolding before his eyes that should have been impossible.

-Is it the 004th Team?

-Hmm, I'll buy just two for now. 010 and 033.

-Handshake... Why is the 023rd Team so expensive?

As confidently predicted by Jeong Yeongwoo⁰⁷ earlier, his paid handshakes were selling like hotcakes.

"Why is the 023rd Team's handshake expensive? Because there's a premium for being ranked first overall."

Yeongwoo answered the customer's question with a sly grin.

But everyone implicitly knew the real reason why the 023rd Team's handshakes were so expensive.

What would happen if the 'rank-seeking challengers' who came here filled every possible handshake opportunity?

At that point, the determining factor for entering the ranks would be the handshake with the 023rd Team, which no one had bought so far due to its exorbitant price.

In short, Jeong Yeongwoo⁰⁷ had orchestrated everything.

-...You seem to see very far—much further than anyone else, Yeongwoo.

Recognizing the grand scope of Yeongwoo's plan, Aldo muttered nervously, and Amana let out a deep sigh.

-With schemers as wicked and cunning as these, how can the universe ever find balance...?

Golem Taru added with a hesitant expression.

-But still...

-But still, what?

-At least for this promotion match, I think balance has been achieved thanks to Yeongwoo.

-What did you just say?

Amana's feathers immediately stood on end in shock.

But Taru continued with his argument.

-If it weren't for the new rules created by Yeongwoo, countless planetary representatives would have died. Things have taken a strange turn, but in the end, it's true that many lives were saved.

-.....

It was a fact too difficult to refute, leaving Amana unable to say anything.

-And isn't it the same with this handshake event? Yeongwoo has the ability to harm all the challengers, but instead, he chose to just take their money.

-That's true.

Amana finally nodded in agreement.

As Taru pointed out, the only things being exchanged here were money and handshakes.

In a place where swords and lives should have been at stake, it was a curious shift.

So, even if Jeong Yeongwoo07 had initiated all this with malicious intent, the outcome leaned more toward good than evil.

-Then... does that mean this could actually be considered good karma?

-Only the system will know for sure.

Taru looked up at the sky.

And during that moment.

Beep-beep-beep!

With a sharp signal sound, a system notification appeared above the promotion arena.

「1 hour remains until the promotion match ends.」

Immediately, the participants on the ground widened their eyes and looked up at the sky.

-Huh?

-What? One hour?

-Is it already that late?

What did those words imply?

It meant there was only one hour left to purchase handshakes.

-Ah, a handshake! I'll buy one more!

-We'll take two!

-The 023rd Team handshake—is it still 100 million?

As expected, participants who hadn't bought enough handshakes scrambled to make their purchases.

Seeing this, Yeongwoo summoned his henchmen to block the 'products' and shouted:

“Starting now, we’re launching a special sale!”

-A s-special sale?

-A sale, you say...

Typically, a special sale implied discounts.

But Yeongwoo’s sale was a little different.

“From this moment, the 023rd Team handshake is 120 million, and all other teams are 60 million karma.”

-What?!

-120 million now?

-This is outrageous! Isn’t this profiteering?

A sudden 20% price hike.

Naturally, the prospective buyers protested.

But Yeongwoo’s ruthless sales tactics didn’t end there.

“Profiteering? What nonsense. Starting now, handshake prices will increase by 20% every 10 minutes. So right now, it’s the cheapest they’ll ever be.”

-You insane bastard.

-Every 10 minutes? A 20% hike?

-You think we’ll fall for such blatant trickery? Enough is enough!

But with only four planetary promotion slots available, most of the participants were desperate to claim one.

And knowing this all too well, Yeongwoo smirked as he slammed a henchman into the ground and declared:

“As planetary representatives and guardians, shouldn’t you first think about what you can do for your own people?”

-...What?

-Huh?

-What's he saying now?

"You've made it this far to this promotion arena. No matter what, shouldn't you leave here with some sort of achievement?"

Slowly, Yeongwoo raised his hand and pointed toward the sky.

More specifically, toward the vague direction of each participant's home planet.

"What I'm selling is not just planetary promotion but your glory itself. Yes, 100 million, 200 million karma—it's not a small amount of money. But the glory you'll gain in return will be equally immense."

Clenching his hand encased in his Vesedel armor, Yeongwoo looked out at the crowd of planetary representatives, their eyes gleaming as if dreaming.

That was right.

Could there be anything more glorious for a planetary representative than to return home with the news of promotion?

Spending some money here for that glory wasn't such a great sacrifice after all.

Moreover:

"Don't forget. The price increases by 20% every 10 minutes. And it takes time to actually handshake too."

...You...

-Ah.

In other words, even if they tried to buy a handshake now, their turn might be delayed, and the price could rise in the meantime.

"I'll say it again. Promotion is cheapest right now."

As Yeongwoo finished his sentence, countless planetary representatives rushed toward him. Not to shake his hand, but to purchase a planetary upgrade opportunity at the lowest price.

-Alright! I'll buy it. Shake hands with me!

-Let us go first! We'll pay for handshake 023 immediately!

-How much would it cost to buy everything you're selling? Could you prioritize them by price for us?

"No. I will sell handshakes in the order of arrival."

Even when someone proposed buying all the handshakes in exchange for moving up in line, Yeongwoo stuck to his principles, which only caused the line of eager buyers to grow longer.

From the earlier conversation, one thing was clear:

'The sooner you line up, the higher your chances of buying a handshake within 10 minutes.'

This statement had been proven true.

-Then let's proceed quickly!

-Hurry up and start selling handshakes! We don't have time!

Participants, holding wads of cash, urged those in the front of the line to purchase quickly. With a wide grin, Yeongwoo announced:

"The handshake sales... begin now!"

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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「2 minutes remaining until the promotion battle ends.」

Time flew by like an arrow.

For Yeongwoo, it felt as though he had spent the entire hour just issuing promissory notes.

And indeed, that was mostly the case.

'This is crazy. So, this is how you do business.'

It was the first proper business Yeongwoo had conducted since Earth connected with the universe.

Yeongwoo blinked as he looked at the dense list of promissory notes displayed on the left side of his vision.

「Total Promissory Note Value」

| 2.46 billion Karma.

And the most remarkable part?

This was achieved without seemingly increasing any "evil karma."

In other words, Yeongwoo learned for the first time that, depending on the situation, it was possible to run a "violent business" without resorting to outright malice.

‘Chairman, are you watching this? Proof that even righteous violence is possible!’

Of course, the buyers who had grudgingly purchased the exorbitantly priced handshakes would likely never agree that this was "righteous violence," but in the grand scheme of things, it wasn't entirely wrong.

After all, everyone here would return to their home planets alive, wouldn't they?

「1 minute remaining until the promotion battle ends.」

The 1-minute warning finally appeared.

Yeongwoo scanned the crowd and spoke.

"Thank you, everyone, from the bottom of my heart! The promissory notes you issued are guaranteed by the universe, so as previously disclosed, failure to pay within two weeks will result in imprisonment. But two weeks is a long time, so I'm sure you can build at least a basic spacecraft by then."

Then, Yeongwoo dramatically pointed a finger toward the sky.

Zap!

"And tomorrow at 3:23 PM Earth time, there will be a major event. If any of you already own a spacecraft, please visit Earth at that time. There will be plenty to see and business opportunities to seize."

「30 seconds remaining until the promotion battle ends.」

"Once again, thank you! Complaints regarding this transaction will be politely declined, but inquiries about new deals are always welcome. If you need help, look for Jeong Yeongwoo07 on Earth."

With those words, Yeongwoo tucked his weapon into his belt and bowed deeply to everyone.

At that moment, three representatives from Team 023 cautiously approached Yeongwoo and asked:

-So... is this really the end?

-Are we parting ways now?

"Why? Are you feeling regretful about leaving?"

-N-not really...

-We're just wondering if it's really okay for us to end as the top team.

Swish.

One of them pointed to the leaderboard displayed above the promotion grounds in real-time.

「Overall Rank: 1st – Team 023」

| 2nd: Team 004 [19 handshakes]

| 3rd: Team 049 [18 handshakes]

| 4th: Team 006 [17 handshakes]

| 5th: Team 033 [17 handshakes]

"Yes. Unless someone takes me down within the next 30 seconds, we'll finish in first place."

Of course, less than 30 seconds remained.

「10 seconds remaining until the promotion battle ends.」

The countdown had already reached the single digits.

Yeongwoo turned to the crowd and shouted:

"Does anyone want to change the rankings one last time? Just two more handshakes could get you to 5th place!"

This prompted Team 033, currently in 5th place, to scream in near-panic.

-W-what are you saying?!

-You can't change rankings at the last minute!

-Do you have no sense of decency?!

「5 seconds remaining.」

Despite Yeongwoo's final sales pitch, no additional buyers emerged.

Everyone who could afford it had already bought handshakes.

‘Damn, I guess this is it.’

As Yeongwoo showed a frustrated expression, the promotion battle countdown dropped below 3 seconds.

「2 seconds remaining.」

And finally...

「1 second remaining.」

『Promotion battle ends.』

"Thank you for your hard work...!"

With Yeongwoo's declaration, time froze across the promotion grounds.

A new system message appeared exclusively in front of Team 023.

「You have passed the 2nd trial of planetary promotion as the overall 1st place team.」

[Team 023, Overall Rank 1st]

| Total Score: 133/100

-Bonus 20 points for balance score.

-Bonus 5 points for first kill.

-Bonus 5 points for creativity from the planetary judge.

-Bonus 3 points from Team 9's salary negotiator.

‘Huh? Team 9? Aren't they the ones who took bribes?’

In the frozen time, Yeongwoo found it odd that Team 9 had awarded bonus points.

He had no idea that Team 9 had successfully negotiated higher salaries thanks to him.

And then...

Flash!

「As the 1st place team, you will now receive special benefits for the 2nd trial.」

‘Oh... finally.’

「However, before choosing your benefits, please evaluate your team members.」

‘Evaluate my team?’

「Among the following three team members, who do you believe contributed the least to passing this promotion trial?」

[Prince Aldo from Doatel]

[Guardian Amana of the Sacred Patrol]

[Taroo, the Last Hope of Pigot]

「The team member with the most votes will receive a downgraded reward and will have a lower chance of being matched with you in similar dungeons.」

‘What... So they’re imposing a tiered reward system on the same team? That’s harsh.’

Even the “worst of the worst” promotions left Yeongwoo stunned. But there was no avoiding the choice.

The next message appeared:

「If you do not select another team member within 10 seconds, you will automatically vote for yourself.」

‘Damn it.’

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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Chapter 374: Cold But Warm (4)

「9 seconds left until the voting ends.」

‘Only 10 seconds? What the hell are they trying to pull?’

The countdown began, the remaining time rapidly ticking away.

With it, Yeongwoo’s mind started racing as well.

There were three possible candidates to vote for:

[Prince Aldo from Doatel]

[Amana, Guardian of Sacred Inquiry]

[Taru, the Last Hope of Pigot]

Strictly speaking, there were actually four.

If no one was chosen within the 10 seconds, the system would automatically cast a vote for oneself.

Essentially, the choice boiled down to one of the four.

But who would the other three teammates vote for?

‘The one with the most votes gets downgraded in their reward tier. Even worse, the chance of encountering them again is significantly reduced.’

In simpler terms, the vote was designed to single out someone to be left behind.

Despite having fought alongside one another in the promotion match, one teammate would be abandoned.

‘Logically speaking, they’re bound to vote for me, the only evildoer among us.’

But would Aldo from Doatel really cast his vote against him?

Proud Amana, who shielded others with his body when lightning spears rained down, or Taru, the one who braved the storm to protect his comrades—could they bring themselves to vote for Yeongwoo?

The more Yeongwoo thought about it, the less he could imagine them doing so.

In the brief time they had spent together, he had come to understand one thing clearly: they weren't the type.

He had witnessed firsthand how righteous individuals operated under fundamentally different assumptions.

'And besides, the question posed alongside the voting rights was about contributions to the promotion match. Those foolish idealists will probably base their judgments purely on that.'

Yeongwoo concluded that the three righteous individuals wouldn't vote against him.

Instead, they would likely opt to sacrifice themselves rather than vote someone else out.

"....."

A sharp pain welled up in his chest for some reason.

'Foolish idiots.'

Even as he muttered inwardly, Yeongwoo continued to deliberate.

If that were the case, the decision ultimately rested with him.

Who should he choose?

'Why does this feel so familiar?'

Unconsciously, Yeongwoo recalled the elimination vote on the first day of his reset.

Each participant had been given a certain amount of Karma Points to cast against elimination candidates.

At the time, his roommate, Im Bonghee, had been frantically voting against others, but Yeongwoo had made a different choice.

He hadn't voted for anyone and simply let the voting period expire.

The result of that decision...

He raised his head in his mind.

While his physical body remained still, in his mind's eye, the title "Strongest Sword" shone brightly.

『Strongest Sword』

That choice on the first day of the reset had triggered a butterfly effect, ultimately leading to his survival.

It was a result-based story, but still, the "balanced" choice had kept him alive until now.

‘...Balance, huh.’

Suddenly, Aldo's words from the promotion match resurfaced in his mind.

Appropriate acts of virtue and vice must occur for the universe's balance to be maintained, Aldo had said.

Maybe this was the time for Yeongwoo to contribute a virtuous act.

By choosing himself, the sole evildoer of Team 023, as the one to fall behind.

Of course, Yeongwoo, ever sly, didn't truly believe he would end up left behind.

‘If the righteous ones all vote for themselves and I also vote for myself, each of us will have one vote. In other words...’

「The team member with the most votes will receive one tier lower rewards and will have a lower chance of being matched in similar dungeons in the future.」

There wouldn't be any single teammate with "the most votes."

‘Conversely, the system might interpret it as everyone having the most votes. It'll ultimately be up to the system's judgment.’

In short, it was a gamble.

If everyone voted for themselves, theoretically, all members could either receive the highest rewards or suffer lower-tier rewards together.

But everyone voting for themselves...

‘That would be balance. If the universe truly values balance, all members will receive the highest rewards.’

「2 seconds left until the voting ends.」

With only 2 seconds remaining, Yeongwoo let the time slip away without casting a vote for any of the three teammates in front of him.

Then.

Beep!

A sharp signal marked the end of the vote, and a message appeared before them.

「The voting period has ended.」

Soon after, another message popped up before all members of Team 023.

「The voting results will now be revealed.」

‘What... They’re announcing the results immediately?’

「Evaluation Results for Team 023」

| Jeong Yeongwoo: 1

| Aldo: 1

| Amana: 1

| Taru: 1

“.....!”

Yeongwoo’s eyes widened in shock.

At the same time, the frozen time within the promotion arena began to move again, and beams of light descended from the sky, piercing through to each participant’s head.

Fwoosh!

-What the?

-Hey, what’s going on?

-Save me!

Amidst the panicked cries, Yeongwoo calmly observed a beam of light heading directly toward him.

‘It’s the return procedure.’

The lack of warning from his regional swordsmanship indicated that this was indeed a "return."

Yeongwoo quickly turned to face the righteous teammates of Team 023.

Then, with his illegitimate sword sheathed, he gave them a slight bow.

“Thank you, everyone.”

-What? Ye-Yeongwoo...

A flustered Aldo tried to say something, but before he could finish, the beam of light enveloped Yeongwoo and lifted him skyward.

The same happened to the other teammates as they were escorted out of the promotion arena.

Shooo!

A sharp sound echoed as Yeongwoo shot through the air, ascending rapidly.

Carried by the beam of light, he pierced through the skies above the promotion arena in an instant.

Then, for just a fleeting moment, he saw “it.”

“‘Huh? What’s that?’

It was a massive oval-shaped structure floating above the arena, almost like a spaceship.

Yeongwoo didn’t know it yet, but that was the very Promotion Examination Headquarters—the place where the Planet Evaluation Team 9 had successfully negotiated their salary adjustments.

“W-Wait! Hold on!”

And just as Yeongwoo thought he saw silhouettes resembling the members of Team 9 near the exterior of the strange structure—

Whoosh!

The beam of light carrying him suddenly turned an ashen gray, and the realm of the void opened up.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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“No, just a little longer! I want to see more!”

It was time to completely leave the promotion arena.

Swoosh!

Before he knew it, Yeongwoo’s entire body had entered the void, and its distinct acrid air began to engulf him.

‘Are they really kicking me out like this?’

He hadn’t even properly observed the peculiar structure in the sky, which he hadn’t realized was there until now, nor had he checked the reward for being ranked first in the promotion test.

‘Just wait a bit...!’

Yeongwoo frantically craned his neck downward and shouted internally, but his surroundings had already begun to change rapidly.

Whoosh!

The ashen-colored void in his vision quickly regained its original hues, revealing an all-too-familiar landscape—the ruined Gwangjin-gu.

“Ah, damn it.”

The moment he returned to Earth, Yeongwoo swore under his breath.

Nearby, his long-time companions—Negwig, the golden goblin, and Pofu Tenta—tilted their heads curiously in unison.

-Squeak.

-Kieek?

-Bap...?

Seeing his old friends again, Yeongwoo could only let out a bitter smile.

“...Thanks for waiting.”

The events at the promotion arena now felt like a fleeting dream, likely due to the abruptness of his return.

But it was no dream; soon, a follow-up message appeared in his vision.

「Jeong Yeongwoo07, who challenged Earth's second promotion trial, has finished with a comprehensive rank of first place!」

The current time was 7:21 AM.

There were still just under 40 minutes left until the morning alarm and the cessation of abnormal weather, and the entire region bordering Gwangjin-gu remained in blackout.

Then—

Pop! Pop! Pop!

As soon as the message was displayed, lights began to illuminate the surrounding areas.

Unintentionally, Yeongwoo had just delivered a nationwide—perhaps even planetwide—wake-up call upon his return.

‘Wait, was that a global announcement?’

This meant other countries in similar time zones might have been jolted awake by the promotion test notification as well.

‘Well, I’ll need to aim for planetary shareholder status anyway, so a little name promotion doesn’t hurt.’

Another message appeared before Yeongwoo’s eyes.

「Results of Team 023 Member Evaluation」

| Jeong Yeongwoo: 1 | Aldo: 1 | Amana: 1 | Taru: 1

“.....!”

It was the evaluation result he’d seen back in the promotion arena.

As Yeongwoo had suspected, none of the other team members had cast elimination votes.

As a result, each vote reverted to its caster, leaving all team members with the same vote count. The system's determination?

「All members of Team 023 received equal votes.」

「As a result, no maximum vote count can be determined, and the penalty is removed.」

“Hell yeah! That’s right!”

Yeongwoo’s pupils dilated to their fullest.

This confirmed something important: the universe doesn’t penalize those who perform acts of virtue.

But what Yeongwoo and the three others accomplished during the team evaluation wasn’t merely an act of kindness.

The three members had, in effect, chosen not to eliminate Yeongwoo, the worst villain in the history of the promotion test.

Meanwhile, Yeongwoo himself refrained from targeting others and instead chose to sacrifice himself—a decision both “cold but warm,” given the stakes of a planetary promotion trial.

‘So, there must be more, right?’

Even if the intention wasn’t pure, actions with good outcomes could still be considered virtuous.

As Yeongwoo’s greed-filled eyes eagerly awaited the next message, something indeed appeared.

Flash!

「For passing the second promotion trial with top marks, a two-tier planetary rank upgrade is guaranteed.」

「As a special reward for first place overall, the ‘Dual Design’ feature is applied to all planetary structures.」

[Dual Design]

| Restrictions on the selection of facilities and devices during construction are lifted.

| However, costs increase for constructions exceeding previous limits.

“What does that mean?”

As Yeongwoo tilted his head in confusion at the somewhat complex tooltip, more system messages began to flood his vision.

「[Victory Monument] construction is now available!」

| If registered under Earth, gains 20% additional Glory Points.

“Ah.”

「[Annihilation Stance] settings are now available!」

| Reduces the number of annihilators to ‘1.’ Enhances ship interception capabilities.

In other words, the restrictions that had previously allowed only one choice between facilities and devices were now completely lifted.

For example, Yeongwoo could now activate the annihilation stance at both Namsan and the Four Great Gates simultaneously.

‘Provided I have enough money, of course.’

Thankfully, money wasn’t an issue.

By 3:23 PM today, he’d be hosting the wedding of Jiseon and Jeonggu, raking in an enormous amount of congratulatory cash gifts.

‘This means I can install duplicates of all future facilities too, right?’

As the planetary rank rose, city levels would naturally increase, unlocking new features and structures.

‘In the universe, money truly is king.’

As Yeongwoo grinned greedily, the final reward of the promotion test appeared before him.

Beep!

It was—

[Planetary Court] “Balanced Fate”

<Mission> Reunite with the following three individuals: (0/3)

-Aldo, the second prince of Doatel

-Amana, the guardian of Sacred Sutral

-Taru, the last hope of Pigot

<Special> Must use a family-owned spaceship.

<Reward> Adjustment of karma score guaranteed by the Planetary Court.

It was a Planetary Court quest.

“.....!”

Yeongwoo could only react with one thought:

“This... is basically a villain rehabilitation program, isn't it?”

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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[Translator - Night]

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Chapter 375: The Host (1)

‘These punks... Did they think they could have some fun just because I played nice at the Promotion Hall?’

Yeongwoo gazed up at the sky.

The system was something akin to a mechanical deity, so it wasn't surprising that it pursued balance.

After all, imbalance leads to collapse.

Wasn't the reason for Earth's reset also attributed to the arrival of an "imbalanced" state?

「On Tuesday, June 10, 2025, at approximately 10:12:08 a.m., an 'imbalanced' state has arisen.」

「This signifies that the majority of humanity harbored hostility toward the world, triggering the forced activation of the reset function.」

But the Planetary Court wasn't a god—it was part of a government and, in a sense, a sort of persona.

Courts, after all, are ultimately a collective of bureaucrats.

Yet even the Planetary Court was attempting to push forward the rehabilitation program of the promotion's Greatest Villain...

‘What exactly is balance in the universe anyway? Is it really some grand principle?’

It seemed that the universe's government also considered maintaining "balance" an extremely important task.

‘Well, whatever. If they adjust my karmic debt, it's good for me.’

[Planetary Court] “Balanced Fate”

<Mission> Reunite with the following three individuals: (0/3)

-Aldo, the second prince of Doatel

-Amana, the guardian of Sacred Sutral

-Taru, the last hope of Pigot

<Special> Must use a family-owned spaceship.

<Reward> Adjustment of karma score guaranteed by the Planetary Court.

Adjustment of karmic debt—this likely meant a reduction.

If Yeongwoo could meet those three, who were both his former promotion comrades and great benefactors, his karmic debt could be reduced.

And if that were the case...

‘From one perspective... it feels like they're trying to help me complete the ‘Burning Ice’ achievement. To pull this off, I'd need to keep increasing my good karma while reducing my bad karma.’

[Burning Ice]

| Ensure that your total points of evil karma do not exceed twice your points of good karma.

For Yeongwoo, who essentially made a living through violent business ventures, this was an achievement that seemed nearly impossible to accomplish.

However, if the Planetary Court's rehabilitation program could significantly lower his bad karma, completing the "Burning Ice" achievement might actually become a serious possibility.

'And they told me to reunite with my old comrades. It doesn't say I have to do good deeds when I meet them, does it? So, even if I go and demand money, it'd still count as completion, wouldn't it?'

Moreover, he was already set to reunite with Aldo, the Second Prince of Doatel, today.

Being royalty, Aldo already had a spaceship and was expected to attend today's ceremony as a guest.

'Then I've basically cleared one of them already.'

That left two quests:

-Amana, the guardian of Sacred Sutral

-Taru, the Last Hope of Pigot

Yeongwoo had no idea where Sacred Sutral or Pigot were located, but based on the quest details, it seemed like he could visit them as long as he had a spaceship.

You must use a spaceship owned by your family for this mission.

If today's wedding ceremony went smoothly, he could progress the court's quest and enhance his family standing in some way.

'Let's just not die at today's ceremony.'

Though the records had foretold his marriage to the Princess of the Sun, that was only the top-priority predicted future.

Straying too far from the predetermined future could trigger unexpected events, leading to his death.

'Let's head back. We can rest until 10 o'clock.'

Current Time: 7:29 a.m.

The extreme weather was about to subside, and the morning call was due to ring soon.

However, the hotel service would last until 10 a.m., allowing him some much-needed rest until then.

Squeak!

As Yeongwoo grabbed the reins, the four-eared creature instinctively turned its head south.

When Yeongwoo stroked its steel mane, it launched into high-speed sprinting.

* * *

7:33 a.m.

When Yeongwoo arrived at the guest room, he was greeted at the door by Jiseon and Jeonggu.

"Y-you've been through a lot."

—What happened out there?

The two had only been able to see the public announcement broadcast earlier and were unaware of the exact details of what had transpired.

「Jeong Yeongwoo07, who challenged Earth's Second promotion Test, has finished with an overall rank of first place!」

Everyone had assumed Yeongwoo had gone into a nighttime dungeon, but the announcement suddenly revealed that he had passed the Second promotion Test.

"What do you mean? I got backstabbed."

As Yeongwoo spoke with a weary expression, undoing his equipment piece by piece, Jiseon clung to him, pressing for answers.

—What do you mean, backstabbed?

"Well, the chairman hinted at it, so I kind of expected it... But today, the portal connected not to a dungeon, but to the Promotion Hall."

—And?

"What else? I worked hard."

Yeongwoo dismissed the feat of earning a staggering 2.46 billion credits from a paid handshake event as merely "working hard."

Even his parents could only imagine the immense effort hidden in the phrase "worked hard."

—Can you really rank first just by working hard? Weren't there other aliens there too?

"Of course there were."

Yeongwoo casually stripped off his Vesedel armor and flopped onto the bed, leaving his companion weapon within arm's reach.

—This brat must've done something crazy again, didn't he?

"Oh, come on. I just need some rest, so don't bother me."

As Yeongwoo furrowed his brow slightly, Jiseon flinched and backed away.

—I'm telling you, he definitely did something terrible, even to aliens.

Unable to confront her son directly, Jiseon muttered to her husband, who nodded silently in agreement.

The two couldn't imagine that their son had actually performed acts of virtue on an alien planet.

"Anyway, isn't the important thing that we succeeded in the additional promotion? The planet where your family will settle—wouldn't it be better if it's a thriving one?"

With his eyes closed, Yeongwoo made this remark, causing Jiseon and Jeonggu's expressions to freeze.

"....."

—.....

They were suddenly reminded that today was not just any day—it was the day of their wedding ceremony.

"Don't even dream of trying to run away. Your wedding is no longer just a family affair."

—What on earth do you mean by that?

"Don't you know who's coming to the wedding today? From the Destroyer King of the Universe to the King of Ten Thousand Demons, the guest list is insane. Now imagine standing them up."

—.....

"That'd be the end of our Earth. Honestly, just a duel between the chairman and Mara could split this planet in half."

There wasn't a single false word in what Yeongwoo said.

With such a colossal guest list invited, the wedding absolutely had to proceed.

"Let's start the rehearsal around 11."

As Yeongwoo casually threw out the next schedule while lying in bed, Jiseon and Jeonggu's eyes widened in shock.

"Rehearsal?"

—Rehearsal? Are we seriously doing a rehearsal?

"Yes. This is a performance worth at least tens of billions. Of course, there's going to be a rehearsal."

The hammer from Kwaya, the prison design company, was scheduled to bring the completed wedding venue at precisely 2:23 p.m.

One hour before the ceremony.

At that point, they'd inspect the actual venue in person, settle the remaining balance if there were no issues, and then proceed with the wedding.

"Our venue arrives around 2. But we can't rehearse just an hour before the ceremony... so we should do it in the morning."

—Rehearsal? Does that mean there's a program?

"I don't know. We'll have to ask Kubu about it later. But I imagine there's at least a basic outline."

Then, Yeongwoo opened his eyes again.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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"If there's no universal wedding protocol, we'll just have to make one. With the amount of money these guests are paying to attend, shouldn't the two of you at least waltz?"

At this, Jiseon instinctively rested her hand on the hilt of her sword.

—What the hell are you talking about? You can't be serious.

"Does it sound like I'm joking?"

In response to his mother's threatening gesture, Yeongwoo's hand instinctively searched for the position of his sword.

Seeing this, Jeonggu quickly stepped between them, forcing an awkward smile.

"Aha... come on, it's a special day. Let's not do this."

—A special day?

"There's a saying... if you can't avoid it, you might as well enjoy it...."

Jeonggu laughed bitterly—more at himself than anyone else.

After all, his words were more for his own sake.

A blue-blooded ice dragon of a wife who boiled with rage at his every word, and a patricidal son deemed the strongest in history.

Jeonggu had no desire to welcome such individuals into his family.

'Damn it... I used to have dreams of a peaceful family too.'

But what could he do when this was the reality he faced?

Truly, Jeonggu stood before a storm.

All he could do now was force a smile and hope no one died.

And since he'd already resigned himself to living on Earth, he figured he might as well support his son's vision for the planet's prosperity.

"I'll... I'll do my best...."

As Jeonggu bowed repeatedly to his son and future wife, Jiseon clicked her tongue and stepped back.

Then, bypassing Jeonggu, she turned to her son and asked:

—So what now? Are we just supposed to wait until 11?

"I haven't had a wink of sleep. So I'll catch some shut-eye until 11. You two keep watch. The room rental ends at 10, right?"

Yeongwoo, still lying in bed, gestured toward the bedroom door.

At this, Jiseon's armor began to glow an ominous blue.

Jeonggu quickly raised his hands and walked to stand guard by the door.

"Fine. If anything happens, I'll wake you up. Happy now?"

"Yes. Thank you. After all, I've earned some rest after upgrading this planet, haven't I?"

With that, Yeongwoo closed his eyes again.

Jiseon opened her mouth to say something but stopped.

—Why is that little brat always so full of himself?

She glanced alternately between Yeongwoo and Jeonggu, who stood at the door.

Finally, she slumped to the floor as if giving up and asked Jeonggu:

—What time is it?

"Seven... forty."

—So, 3 hours and 20 minutes until the rehearsal. Damn it.

Jiseon exhaled heavily inside her helmet.

Swallowing hard, Jeonggu checked his watch. It was now 7:41.

Only one minute had passed.

So he, too, cursed silently to himself.

‘...Damn it.’

* * *

This is a dream.

Yeongwoo knew for sure.

How?

BOOOOOOM...!

He was aboard the chairman's tombstone-shaped spaceship.

Seated on a massive iron throne, clad in Vessedel armor, Yeongwoo gazed forward where Kubu gripped the controls with nonexistent hands.

Having never seen the interior of the chairman's ship, this vivid depiction could only mean one thing.

'What an absurd dream.'

In this absurd dream, Yeongwoo traversed the cosmos.

He didn't know the destination.

Dream-Yeongwoo simply stared at the scenery beyond the control room screen, encased in the tombstone-shaped vessel.

Then—

-Gah, M-Master!

Kubu turned, his enormous eyes wide, calling out to Yeongwoo.

And he addressed him as "Master."

"What is it, Kubu?"

Dream-Yeongwoo shifted his gaze to Kubu, who seemed ready to say something.

CRAAAASH!

A massive stone structure smashed through the exterior of the control room, barreling in without restraint.

"AAAAAAH!"

Dream-Yeongwoo let out a rather undignified scream from his throne.

And then—

FLASH!

“Ugh!”

Yeongwoo’s vision went white as he woke with a start.

“Fuck!”

Shocked, he sat up, running his hands across the bed.

Jeonggu, who had been trying to wake him, almost screamed.

"Y-Yeongwoo! You're up? You need to get up now! It's urgent!"

At the mention of something urgent, Yeongwoo snapped his head toward his father.

"What the hell? What could possibly be so urgent the moment I wake up?"

Soaked in cold sweat, he stared at his trembling father, who uttered an incomprehensible phrase.

"A... wreath... from space."

"Wreath?"

"Yeah, a wreath. From space."

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Chapter 376: The Host (2)

“What... A wreath has arrived?”

Yeongwoo instinctively checked the current time.

The numbers 10:39 glowed brightly on his wristwatch.

10:39 a.m.

Thankfully, it was almost in line with his desired wake-up time.

“Who sent the wreath?”

Yeongwoo asked again, this time with a hint of irritation.

Jeonggu scratched his forehead.

“How would I know? The host needs to sign for it before it can be taken away.”

“Excuse me? Who exactly?”

“It looked like a delivery person.”

Now Jeonggu was scratching his neck.

He seemed as perplexed by the situation as Yeongwoo.

“Anyway, hurry down. It’s a mess outside.”

“...”

The situation sounded ominous.

Yeongwoo quickly geared up and dashed out of the room.

As he stepped into the hotel corridor, he noticed Lim Suna from Taewon Group waiting for him.

“Mayor.”

“Oh, Suna.”

The title "Mayor" made Yeongwoo flinch momentarily, but Suna ignored it and proceeded with what she needed to say.

“A congratulatory item has arrived at the hotel entrance.”

“A congratulatory item... Are you talking about the wreath? I was just coming down after hearing about it from my father.”

“A wreath... I suppose it could be called that.”

Suna tilted her head slightly.

It seemed like calling it a wreath was purely her father's assumption.

‘What exactly is waiting down there...?’

The "wreath" was becoming increasingly mysterious.

“But why did you personally come all the way here for this? You could have passed the message to my parents and gone about your business.”

Yeongwoo tried to be considerate, but Suna wore an awkward expression.

“Well...”

She glanced toward the emergency stairs, confirming that the elevator was out of service due to overdue maintenance.

“The congratulatory item occupies an enormous space. According to the delivery company, the host must approve before it can be relocated.”

It was clear that Suna’s explanation was much more precise than his father’s vague account.

“So it’s a complicated issue. But in any case, it sounds like I need to go down and resolve it myself.”

“Yes. I apologize for interrupting your rest...”

“We’ll have to take the stairs, right? If you don’t mind, I’ll go ahead.”

When Yeongwoo offered, Suna bowed slightly in gratitude.

“I’ll follow shortly.”

* * *

Taewon Group.

Before the reset, it ranked third in the domestic corporate hierarchy.

Now, it functioned as an administrative unit managing Gangnam, the heart of Metal Seoul.

For such a corporation to send someone expressing “concern” was unusual.

They claimed that the congratulatory item addressed to Yeongwoo was causing problems in Gangnam.

What on earth could it be?

'Surely they didn't send something like a giant bomb?'

Given the diverse and utterly unpredictable affiliations of the guests, Yeongwoo couldn't even hazard a guess about the nature of the "congratulatory item."

Finally.

Tap tap!

As Yeongwoo descended the seemingly endless emergency stairs, he arrived at the hotel lobby.

'Let's see what this is about.'

The moment Yeongwoo stepped into the lobby, he sensed an unusual commotion outside.

"Wow..."

"What is that?"

"Isn't it going to collapse...?"

A crowd had gathered in front of the hotel's main entrance, murmuring in awe.

When a few people spotted Yeongwoo inside the lobby, they shouted out:

"Oh! It's the Strongest Sword!"

"The Mayor's here!"

"Yeongwoo! Over here!"

With the inconsistent ways people addressed him, Yeongwoo couldn't help but notice how disorganized everything was.

Amidst the chaos, Yeongwoo stepped toward the bizarre structure towering at the front of the crowd.

'What the hell is that?'

Standing at the front was a rectangular stone tower that resembled an ancient monument.

Even as Yeongwoo approached the main entrance, the top of the stone tower remained out of sight.

Finally.

Thud.

When Yeongwoo stepped outside, the crowd parted, creating a path for him to approach the tower.

And as he got closer, the upper portion of the tower began to change.

Crack, crack, crack!

Initially a perfect rectangle, the upper section of the stone tower split apart, transforming into a shape resembling a flower bud.

In other words.

‘Did someone actually send me a stone flower? Who the hell would do this?’

It turned out to be a “wreath,” just as Jeonggu had said.

Then, someone standing at the base of the tower noticed Yeongwoo and ran toward him.

-Oh, are you Mr. Jeong Yeongwoo-07?

The figure was a Ratman clad in mechanical armor—a humanoid rat with a long, thin mustache on either side of its snout.

Standing about 1.5 meters tall, the Ratman didn’t seem particularly intimidating, which was probably why Gangnam’s residents dared to crowd around the tower.

‘The world really has changed. People don’t even flinch at the sight of a Ratman anymore.’

Yeongwoo mused that this might be the right time to proceed with integrating Guro-gu’s Red Foot Orcs.

Truly, the era of multiculturalism had arrived.

After all, these people had been witnessing monsters falling from the sky almost daily for over a week now and surviving to tell the tale.

It was no wonder a mere Ratman didn’t scare them.

“Yes, I’m Jeong Yeongwoo07. Are you the one who delivered this?”

Yeongwoo extended his hand for a handshake, and the Ratman reciprocated without hesitation.

Clap.

-Yes, sir. I am York, a courier for the transport company Kario.

“Nice to meet you.”

York the Courier.

Yeongwoo noticed that York’s strength was impressive, enough to deduce that if York wanted to, he could easily overpower everyone present—except for Yeongwoo himself.

Of course, York had no reason to do so.

Still, it was clear that Gangnam’s citizens were unknowingly standing before a formidable being.

“Courier work must be tough. Your strength is remarkable.”

Yeongwoo tightened his grip slightly as he spoke, and York twitched his whiskers in a smile.

-Thank you for noticing. In space, many things can happen. At the very least, one must be able to safeguard the cargo and escape.

That wasn’t all.

As an intergalactic courier, York must have encountered countless aliens and dealt with planetary peculiarities that Yeongwoo couldn’t even imagine.

“Do you think you might accept a commission from me someday?”

In the universe, connections were power.

As Yeongwoo carefully released the handshake and asked, York pulled out a thin piece of metal about the length of a middle finger from his waist.

Swipe.

「Rat-colored pager」 - General tool

【Diligent, Prompt. Kario Transport.】

[Sub-Universe Manager, Chief York.

In other words, it was a kind of business card-cum-pager.

-As long as the price is right... we can transport almost anything.

"Then, would you happen to transport living beings too?"

-Pardon? Th-that depends... if my safety is assured...

"I'm kidding."

When Yeongwoo burst into hearty laughter, York finally relaxed his tense expression.

He'd only now realized that this was no ordinary customer.

Afterward, York glanced around as if suddenly curious and muttered,

-Where on Earth is this?

It sounded like he was talking to himself.

Then, he manipulated a device attached to the chest of his mechanical armor, bringing up the current location.

Beep!

[||||I-Earth]

But who was this opposite him?

Yeongwoo, the king of curiosity, wouldn't miss such an odd statement.

He immediately asked,

"What do you mean by 'which Earth'? What are you talking about?"

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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-Excuse me?

"Are you saying there are other Earths?"

-It's only natural for planets with the same name to exist across the universe. That's why we have unique coordinates, isn't it?

York, as if stating the obvious, fiddled with the device that had just displayed the coordinates.

Yeongwoo, on the other hand, was dumbfounded.

"No, no! Hold on a second! Multiple Earths exist?"

Even the usually composed Yeongwoo grabbed York, looking visibly flustered.

York glanced at Yeongwoo's hands gripping him, then subtly leaned back.

-Earth has always been one of many. So is my home planet.

"That... that makes no sense."

Of course, having multiple planets named Earth might not be all that strange.

After all, a name is just a name.

But in the universe Yeongwoo had experienced, no letter was used frivolously.

Even in item tooltips, a single modifier could change the meaning entirely.

So, for the universe to give multiple planets the same name...

"Mr. York, have you ever visited another planet named Earth?"

When Yeongwoo asked this to glean more details about the other Earths, York stared blankly at the air for a moment before shaking his head.

-No. This is my first time on any Earth. If it weren't for a delivery job, I wouldn't have come here either.

"I see..."

Yeongwoo sighed, sounding almost disappointed.

But then, York said something that made Yeongwoo's ears perk up.

-However, I've heard the name before. Earth, I mean.

"What...? You've heard of another Earth?"

Yeongwoo unknowingly frowned in irritation.

Why?

Because the thought of a space-traveling deliveryman hearing about another Earth before this one felt slightly bruising to his ego.

Did that mean there was a more famous Earth than this one?

"Why... why is that Earth famous?"

-It's not so much famous as... infamous among deliverymen.

"Infamous?"

-Here's someone patrolling the boundaries between lower and upper universes. If you fail to answer their questions, they'll rob you of everything you're carrying. That person is said to hail from Earth.

"Wait, what? You're saying there's an Earthling robbing people at the edge of the universe?"

When Yeongwoo pointed to himself while saying "Earthling," York stared at him intently.

-As I said earlier, I've never seen that person myself. Thankfully, I'm only a lower-universe manager and don't frequent the boundary. And the boundary is so vast that only a handful have encountered them directly.

York's claim was that it was more of a ghost story circulating among deliverymen than a verified fact.

-When a deliveryman loses their cargo, the transport company naturally holds them accountable. So, many companies have sent teams to recover the stolen goods from the boundary.

This was the reasoning behind why the boundary ghost story had some factual basis.

"And?"

-But as far as I know, no company or client has ever caught the person at the boundary. Even now, rumors occasionally circulate about goods disappearing there.

"...It's truly a ghost story."

Yeongwoo felt a strange mix of emotions.

The idea that someone from a planet named Earth was robbing people at the treacherous boundary of the universe—and surviving—was both absurd and fascinating.

"Who the hell is this guy?"

As Yeongwoo muttered this to himself, York checked his coordinate device again and handed something over.

Swish.

-Please sign here. I need to head to my next delivery soon.

It was a large metal plate with a spacious blank area for a signature.

When Yeongwoo placed his palm over the plate, York nodded.

-Thank you. The delivery today is a ceremonial gift. The sender is...

York studied the unfamiliar script written at the bottom of the plate, then looked back at Yeongwoo.

-It says, 'From Kwaya's Hammer Team.'

"Kwaya?"

That Kwaya.

The prison design company scheduled to set up the wedding venue today.

-Yes. Let me briefly explain how it works...

"That thing works?"

-Of course. It has a criminal detection function.

"What?"

Yeongwoo facepalmed.

Leave it to a prison design company to send a wreath matching their theme.

-If you look at the top, you'll see a bud forming.

"Yes, I see it."

-That reacts to cosmic sins and interstellar criminal records. When a particularly notorious guest visits, the bud will fully bloom.

"I see..."

It was an unwelcome gift.

But it was already delivered, so sending it back wasn't an option.

It seemed they'd have to place it near the venue.

"By the way, the wedding is scheduled for a different region. Why did it arrive here?"

-The sender requested delivery to the host's location.

"Sigh."

-If you'd like, I can change the installation site. Should I?

"Of course. This is practically my front yard."

As Yeongwoo sighed and replied, the sky above Metal Seoul flashed for a moment.

Fwoosh!

Then, with a deafening sonic boom, an obviously massive object shot down at incredible speed.

BOOM!

"Ah, crap. What now?"

As Yeongwoo stared at the sky in exasperation, York took a step back, his voice trembling.

-It's... an express cargo.

"What? Express? How can you tell?"

York stiffened his whiskers and replied.

-I can see the 'handle with care' mark.

"Handle with care?"

-Yes... Do you happen to have any guests arriving from the Void?

"Ah."

Yeongwoo blinked.

It seemed Mara, the Master of the Void, was indeed attending the wedding today.

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Chapter 377: The Host (3)

"But... no matter how I look at it, that doesn't seem like a floral wreath."

As Yeongwoo furrowed his brows and carefully observed the mysterious express cargo, it began emitting smoke as it approached from the sky.

Sssszzzzt!

As if it were a fire.

"What? Why is that happening?"

"Isn't it on fire?"

"This doesn't look good..."

People gathered in front of the hotel began murmuring while watching the sky, and soon, the true nature of the express cargo was revealed through the smoke.

Fwoosh!

The cargo turned out to be a massive, oval-shaped object in a deep navy hue.

Its surface looked smooth, almost like a polished pebble.

The problem was...

Clank!

When it reached about 100 meters above Gangnam-gu, four claw-like appendages extended from its bottom.

Like those of a claw machine.

At that moment:

“R-Run!”

“It’s attacking!”

“It’s a monster, a monster...!”

People gathered in front of the hotel started fleeing in panic.

Instinctively, they felt a threat emanating from the express cargo.

In contrast, Yeongwoo—

Click.

—took a step toward the descending cargo and muttered.

“What in the world did Mara send?”

The Master of the Void, Mara, wanted Yeongwoo to replace Ben Walter as the new proxy.

To that end, Mara had implicitly promised to send a wedding gift.

In other words, since the rivalry over wedding gifts from other parties hadn’t even begun yet, there was no reason for Mara to attack the planet.

Thus, it was overwhelmingly likely that this express cargo wasn’t meant for an attack but had some symbolic meaning—like the stone monument sent by kwaya to celebrate the ceremony.

Boom!

Eventually, the mysterious express cargo landed in the heart of Gangnam-gu, and the four claws protruding from its bottom dug deep into the ground.

Crunch!

As the scene resembled a tree taking root, Yeongwoo felt a twinge of unease.

“York, have you seen cargo like this before? You recognized it as something from the Void earlier.”

York, trembling slightly with his long beard, answered.

—Most Void cargo has a special mark to prevent loss. I recognized it by that mark. It was labeled ‘Handle With Care: Void Cargo.’

“So you don’t know exactly what it is?”

—...No. You cannot predict what comes from the Void.

“...”

Yeongwoo agreed with that sentiment.

That’s why he was curious about how Mara would appear at the venue today—and in what manner.

“Then... what exactly is a Void wreath...”

As Yeongwoo muttered, taking another step toward the enigmatic monument, a ratman resembling York appeared from behind Mara’s gift.

‘What the... Are ratmen typically delivery agents in space?’

—Ah, you’re already here.

The ratman, who had brought the Void cargo, removed his strange helmet and bowed politely.

Unlike York, who wore mechanical armor, this one was clad in medieval-style silver armor.

However, the helmet appeared to be a high-tech device, seemingly used for identifying items or locating coordinates.

—I am Moru, from Sero Transport.

The silver-armored ratman extended a business card, just as York had.

Shff.

「Silver Summoner」 - Common Tool

【Nothing is impossible! Sero transport.】

| Hazard Specialist Agent Moru.

“Oh, you’re an agent. Nice to meet you.”

Yeongwoo spoke, noting that Agent Moru’s beard had turned ashen.

It was likely due to the effort of delivering the object all the way from the Void.

—Ah.

Moru seemed to notice Yeongwoo’s gaze and quickly brushed his beard with both hands.

Poof!

Ashy dust briefly scattered around his snout and beard before vanishing into the air.

—This celebratory stone... was personally ordered for delivery by Lord Mara, the ruler of the Void and King of Ten Thousand Demons.

Moru respectfully folded his hands and gestured toward the massive navy stone behind him.

Yeongwoo couldn’t help but ask.

“Thank you for your hard work. But do you happen to know what exactly this thing does?”

After all, the cargo sent by kwaya’s Hammer had been explained in detail by York, who had delivered it.

However—

—Er... I was only tasked with delivering it. I wasn’t given any specific details about the cargo. My apologies.

As the King of Ten Thousand Demons, Mara’s approach naturally differed from that of kwaya’s Hammer.

With Mraa being in a superior position to Yeongwoo, he had simply sent the item without explanation.

‘What the... It’s obviously not just a decorative item. Shouldn’t they at least provide a minimal explanation? This guy needs to be put in his place during the gift rivalry.’

Feeling slightly indignant, Yeongwoo continued to gaze at the still-mysterious Void wreath.

Meanwhile, Agent Moru, twitching his beard, spoke up.

—Well then, I'll be taking my leave. My task was merely to deliver the celebratory stone.

“Wait, hold on. You can't just leave it here. Move it over there before you go.”

Shff.

Yeongwoo gestured toward Gwangjin-gu.

Moru's beard bristled.

—Oh, is this the wrong location?

“Yes. Lord Mara set the delivery address incorrectly. The wedding venue is in the neighboring district. York, bring the thing sent by kwaya's Hammer and follow me.”

Yeongwoo pointed toward kwaya's gift, a detection device, as he gave the instructions.

After all, if it were a wreath, it should be placed near the wedding venue—especially since kwaya's wreath was designed to bloom beautifully at the ceremony site.

‘Would it bloom if the chairman were to come? Well, there are quite a few prestigious guests, after all...’

As Yeongwoo scratched his chin, gazing at the two wreaths, two Ratmen stood in front of their respective cargoes and scattered small, marble-like objects near the wreaths.

“Ah.”

It was a familiar object.

‘Aren't those the ones the military chief used?’

Exactly.

Those were the very same transmitters that Dogo's military chief used to retrieve Lemu's spaceship and the chairman's sword.

It seemed this equipment was universally used across the galaxy.

Swoosh!

Soon, the two large wreaths transformed into holograms and were absorbed into the scattered marbles.

‘Wow, so that’s how they work.’

The Ratmen then picked up the marbles they had scattered and looked at Yeongwoo.

Yeongwoo gestured toward Gwangjin-gu after summoning the quad-legged vehicle.

“Let’s go, to my parents’ wedding venue.”

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The journey to Gwangjin-gu with two intergalactic couriers.

Fortunately, both were compact enough to barely fit in the back of the quad-legged vehicle.

“But how will you both return?”

Noticing they didn’t seem to have brought any additional transport, Yeongwoo asked, and York pointed to the sky in response.

—We’ve docked our freighter outside the city’s shield.

“A shield?”

—Yes. This is a Level 3 city, isn’t it?

“Oh... right?”

Yeongwoo had almost forgotten that Metal Seoul had been upgraded to Level 3 thanks to contributions to the Glory Score by Lord Bang.

—Freighters without clearance cannot enter a Level 3 city.

“But dropping cargo is allowed?”

Yeongwoo asked with a slightly disappointed tone, and York nodded.

—Regrettably, yes.

In other words, preventing unauthorized cargo drops would require raising the city's level further.

'Hmm... if I build the new monument and exterminator now, will that raise the level?'

While Yeongwoo pondered this, the ruins of Gwangjin-gu came into view.

—Is that the wedding venue?

Moru asked, pointing to the desolate ruins.

York tilted his head as if he couldn't comprehend it either.

—Whose wedding is this, exactly?

"It's my parents' wedding."

—.....?

—What?

"Please place the wreaths over there."

Yeongwoo indicated the western boundary of Gwangjin-gu as the desired spot for the wreaths.

Since the exact size of the wedding venue was still unclear, it was crucial to secure as much space as possible.

Whoosh!

The two wreaths were placed in the designated location, and the Ratmen began preparing to leave.

Clink!

They threw what appeared to be a mechanical platform onto the ground and stepped onto it.

"What's that?"

—It's a return device. It instantly transports us back to the freighter.

As York explained, he stepped onto the platform, which began glowing blue and enveloped his body in a holographic shroud.

Whirrr!

“If I attacked you now, would you not be able to return to your ship?”

Yeongwoo’s offhanded question startled York.

—That... that would be disastrous!

Even as his body was enveloped in holograms, York flinched in panic.

Then, suddenly—

Swoosh!

A beam of light shot into the sky as York disappeared into the atmosphere above Gwangjin-gu.

Moru, also from Sero Logistics, followed suit, becoming a hologram and ascending rapidly.

In an instant, the two couriers vanished from Earth.

‘Intergalactic couriers... there’s something romantic about it.’

Yeongwoo stared blankly at the two disappearing into the stars before turning his gaze back to the wreaths they had left.

Click.

The stone wreath sent by Kwaya’s Hammer remained tightly budded, while the massive navy-blue rock sent by Mara showed no signs of activity.

‘No way this is just a keepsake... What function could it possibly have?’

Yeongwoo couldn’t believe that the King of Demons, Mara, would send a wreath merely to celebrate a wedding.

Even he wouldn’t do such a thing.

So what secret function was hidden in this wreath?

“Hmm.”

As Yeongwoo approached to inspect the surface for any changes—

KABOOM!

A thunderous roar erupted from the sky above Gwangjin-gu, where the couriers had disappeared.

“What? Another wreath coming?”

Yeongwoo thought about the many powerful guests he had invited—figures like Dogo, Mara, Lemu, and even the Planet Assessment Team 9—all of whom might send their own elaborate wreaths.

“If more keep arriving, it’ll interfere with the rehearsal...”

As he worriedly glanced upward, an incredible symbol appeared in his vision.

Glint!

“Ah...!”

It was what Yeongwoo had been eagerly waiting for.

A steel monolith, engraved with Dogo’s Wedge Insignia, was descending.

“Chairman? Chairman...!”

Startled, Yeongwoo instinctively ran toward the direction of the descending monolith.

At that moment, Mara’s wreath began to stir.

Clunk!

A sudden unlocking sound came from the navy-blue rock as cracks formed on its upper surface.

And then—

Whirrr!

It started drawing energy with an unmistakably hostile intent.

“Wait, Ma... Mara! Hold on a second!”

Realizing the purpose behind Mara’s early arrival, Yeongwoo shouted in panic.

Zap!

A violet laser beam erupted from the top of the navy-blue rock.

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Chapter 378: The Host (4)

‘Are you kidding me, you crazy bastard...?!’

Targeting the wreath.

This was a strategy that Yeongwoo could never have imagined.

The reason Mara had sent their wreath unusually early was ultimately to ensure it arrived on Earth before Dogo’s wreath did.

That way, they could ambush the incoming wreath.

And indeed, that was precisely what happened.

BOOM!

A laser shot from Mara’s navy-blue monolith streaked mercilessly toward Dogo’s wreath.

“Fuck!”

The ultimate evil (aka Jeong Yeongwoo07) let out a string of curses, visibly flustered.

No matter how skilled he was at dominating planetary advancement battles, his current status was merely that of a promising up-and-comer—a rising star.

Simply put, he was exceptional among the newcomers of the galactic martial arts world, but when viewed on a universal scale, he was far from being able to claim the title of "strongest."

‘The universe really is vast, huh...’

Not just in raw power, but also in sheer cunning, he was far from reaching the pinnacle of the cosmos.

‘What kind of life do you have to live to come up with tactics like that?’

Yeongwoo gritted his teeth, watching as the violet laser closed in on the gravestone-shaped wreath.

Screech.

But Yeongwoo, a fledgling in the vast cosmos, had overlooked one crucial fact.

That fact was—

Click!

“Huh?”

Just like Mara, who had sent the sniper wreath, their opponent Dogo was also a seasoned veteran of the universe.

Right before the laser could strike, the wedge-shaped emblem on Dogo’s gravestone wreath began to glow brightly.

Fwoosh!

And then—

BOOM!

Mara’s laser struck Dogo’s wreath, but nothing happened.

“...What.”

Yeongwoo’s eyes widened in shock.

‘No way... Did they send a defense system with the wreath, anticipating an attack?’

Rookie.

He was still a rookie.

Compared to seasoned villains like Dogo and Mara, Yeongwoo was still nothing more than a greenhorn.

‘Fuck. If Mara could come up with the idea of targeting the wreath, the Chairman would have anticipated that too.’

Yeongwoo slapped his forehead in frustration.

Meanwhile, Dogo’s gravestone-shaped wreath slammed into the ground in Gwangjin-gu with a thunderous crash.

BOOM!

And it landed deliberately—right next to Mara’s navy-blue monolith.

A deliberately chosen landing spot.

‘These guys are all insane...’

This was the world of the truly skilled, where the extraordinary thrived.

For the first time, Yeongwoo doubted whether he could truly survive in this universe.

Click!

The sound of a lock being released echoed from the gravestone wreath.

Then—

Thud!

A massive shadow emerged from within.

“What the—?”

It was none other than—

Guppy.

A prominent figure from the planet Jargal.

The CEO of Guppy Express.

-Yeongwoo, we meet again.

“...?”

But contrary to expectations, Guppy was not particularly eloquent.

‘That explains why he relies so heavily on gestures.’

The last time Yeongwoo encountered Guppy was at the C-class rare dungeon, Batum’s Casino.

That was also where Yeongwoo had first encountered Mara’s underlings.

At the time, it was Guppy Express employees who had defeated Mara’s henchmen and sent them packing.

So, it wasn’t surprising that Guppy himself showed up to handle this situation.

‘Well, considering Guppy Express is practically a subsidiary of Dogo, there was no need for them to outsource the delivery.’

Yeongwoo silently learned yet another lesson: having multiple subsidiaries could significantly cut costs.

It also resolved trust issues in a snap.

“Did you come here personally because of the wreath?”

Yeongwoo asked, and Guppy nodded, alternating his gaze between Dogo’s gravestone wreath and Mara’s navy-blue monolith before giving a thumbs-up.

It seemed to indicate the delivery was completed successfully.

Yeongwoo couldn’t help but ask.

“Um... Guppy, does our wreath have any special features too?”

As someone experiencing these galactic wreaths for the first time, everything was new to Yeongwoo.

Even the hammer-shaped wreath sent by Kwaya’s Hammer had a criminal-detection feature, and Mara’s wreath needed no further explanation.

‘It seems customary to include some kind of functionality in these wreaths...’

As Yeongwoo pondered and waited for an answer, Guppy pointed to Mara’s navy-blue monolith.

-We’ll send it back.

“Pardon...?”

Before Yeongwoo could fully process the meaning, Guppy was already looking skyward.

‘Oh, come on...’

It was obvious to anyone what “sending it back” implied.

“Mara won’t send another wreath, right? They’re not planning to attack the main ceremony with a ship, are they?”

If such a thing happened, wouldn’t Mara retaliate?

The wedding would literally turn into a battlefield.

-We’ll send it back!

Guppy raised a stubby finger to the sky.

It was clear now.

The wreath Guppy brought was also a sniper turret, just like Mara’s.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me... They’re all the same lunatics.’

Feeling overwhelmed, Yeongwoo cautiously grabbed Guppy’s thick arm and pleaded.

“Look, I get it. Pride battles are fine, but shouldn’t we at least ensure the wedding goes smoothly? My success benefits the Chairman too, doesn’t it?”

This wedding had to go well for Yeongwoo to complete the Roots Restoration achievement and establish a family.

Only then could he acquire a spaceship to either invade other planets or meet the three pioneers.

“So... could you deactivate the sniper function? There’s still time before the main ceremony...”

Yeongwoo gestured toward the gravestone wreath, pleading.

But Guppy simply pointed to the sky again.

-Chairman’s orders.

“ ... ”

Yeongwoo was left speechless.

Of course, a mere delivery agent like Guppy wouldn't have the authority to override the Chairman's instructions.

And surely, the Chairman wasn't oblivious to the consequences of activating a ship-mounted sniper system at a wedding.

This could only mean one thing: the Chairman had some plan to handle the aftermath.

Unless, of course, he intended to abandon Earth altogether.

'Damn it... In the end, if things go south, everyone's going down.'

Yeongwoo turned his gaze toward the City Self-Destruct button—a privilege of the Metal Seoul Mayor.

The massive bomb buried under Gwangjin-gu's surface, known only to Yeongwoo, Jeonggu, and Jiseon, could only be activated by the Mayor himself.

Slide.

Finally, Guppy held out a massive metal plate to Yeongwoo.

-Sign here.

It resembled the signature plates that the previous delivery drivers had handed over.

When Yeongwoo placed his palm on it, Guppy examined the plate for a moment before nodding.

-It's all set.

Then, staring at the empty Gwangjin District, he added:

-Congratulations!

Right on cue, Jeonggu and Jiseon appeared from the other side.

Hearing the sound of Mara's celebratory wreaths firing off, they had come rushing over in a panic.

"Hey, Yeongwoo!"

—What's going on here?

The duo's attention was immediately drawn to the alien wreaths that stood out prominently.

The sizes increased in order: Dogo, Mara, and Kwaya's Hammer, with the largest, Dogo's wreath, towering around 30 meters high.

No one could guess how big the wedding hall arriving later this afternoon would be, but chances were it wouldn't be as massive as the wreath.

"Ah... There's quite a problem, but it's not something you two can solve, so don't worry about it."

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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As Yeongwoo said this, he looked to the sky, and Jeonggu instinctively followed his son's gaze, sensing impending doom.

"...What now? What crazy thing are you planning this time?"

"I wish it were me. This time, it's not."

Concern filled Yeongwoo's eyes.

This only deepened the fear on Jeonggu's face.

If this reckless son of his was worried, it had to be something truly out of the ordinary.

-I must leave.

With that, Guppy retrieved the metal plate from Yeongwoo and looked toward the sky.

Then—

Whoosh!

A previously clear sky was suddenly pierced by an elevator encased in thick chains, plummeting at high speed.

"Guppy Express!"

Presumably, a Guppy Express ship was waiting beyond the sky.

-Congratulations to you as well!

Guppy bowed toward Jeonggu and Jiseon before detaching the chains from the elevator, which now rested on the ground.

Clank!

Leaving the elevator behind, Guppy wrapped the chain's end around his arm.

"Wait, Guppy?"

Clearly, he intended to use the chain to return to his ship.

But what about the elevator?

"Hold on! Why are you leaving that behind?"

Yeongwoo pointed to the abandoned elevator, prompting Guppy to give him a signature thumbs-up and a faint smile.

-A memento. Congratulations!

"What?"

Before Yeongwoo could say more, Guppy was yanked upward by the chain, soaring into the sky.

Whoosh!

Leaving behind what looked like a heap of scrap metal, Guppy vanished into the heavens.

"Hey, Guppy! Aren't you going to leave any wedding gift?"

Yeongwoo shouted into the void, but Guppy was already out of sight, disappearing into the distant sky.

And just like that—

Pop!

He was gone, leaving Yeongwoo, Jiseon, and Jeonggu to stare at the now pristine sky.

"Still, the wedding hasn't even started yet. What on earth is all this?"

Jeonggu muttered, gazing at the now-clear sky.

Meanwhile, Yeongwoo scratched his cheek, already moving on to the next step.

“For an event this big, even the prelude isn’t ordinary. Anyway, are you both ready for the rehearsal? I’m about to call Kubu.”

Whatever chaos might unfold later, the wedding preparations had to continue.

"Kubu, are you there?"

As Yeongwoo summoned the tax advisor, the space between the three stretched horizontally, and Kubu emerged, eyes blinking open.

-Yes, standing by. The ceremony is imminent.

Terrible news for Jeonggu and Jiseon.

But Yeongwoo ignored their grim expressions and asked Kubu:

“This is still an official wedding, so there must be some mandatory procedures, right?”

-That is correct.

“So, what essential steps are required? We need to finish the rehearsal in the morning and prepare to receive guests in the afternoon.”

Kubu blinked his large eyes a few times, scanning the still-desolate Gwangjin District.

-According to the family court’s ceremonial protocol, the essential steps are: the entrance of the participants, declaration of agreement, exchange of tokens, and the blessing by a representative guarantor.

“A representative guarantor's blessing? Like a speech?”

-That is correct.

“Then for our wedding, we can include a ranking of monetary gifts and an event where the top contributor ejects a guest, right?”

-...

Kubu didn’t reply.

“Is it possible?”

-...Yes, it is. The necessary facilities are already being prepared. However...

“However?”

-The participants' entrance traditionally requires the accompaniment of their family heads.

“Wait, by family heads, you mean the parents?”

Given the term “family head,” it could mean grandparents or older ancestors.

Apparently, even in a cosmic wedding, it was customary for the parents of the couple to accompany them.

-They do not have to be parents, but they must be the family heads or possess equivalent qualifications.

“Then isn't that me? I'm the host, after all.”

That was true.

Yeongwoo had planned and executed the entire event.

Even the guests were practically all his.

That is correct. As the family head, you may accompany the participants. However, as there is only one family head in this case, you must choose.

“Choose? You mean who to walk with?”

-That is correct.

“Ah.”

Yeongwoo finally understood.

Traditionally, the family heads of the couple would accompany them during the entrance.

However, since this wedding involved the parents marrying each other, there weren't enough family heads.

“Well, both sets of parents' parents are dead.”

Yeongwoo blinked as he said this, and Kubu elaborated:

-One participant will have to enter without a family head.

“Really?”

-But it is no simple task. The entrance serves as a test of the participants’ qualities.

“A test? What do you mean?”

-During the entrance, all guests are permitted to test the participants’ composure and courage using any means, as long as it does not cause harm as defined by the family court.

“Damn it, what kind of nonsense is that?”

Despite his words, Yeongwoo understood.

Even Earth had similar customs.

But still—

"Wait... given the state of my guests, you're allowing composure and courage tests?"

-It is a tradition permitted by the family court, and we cannot intervene.

“This is messed up.”

So, who would face an aisle filled with intergalactic villains alone?

Yeongwoo turned around to find Jeonggu and Jiseon, who had been listening to the conversation, wearing complicated expressions.

Well, it was only Jeonggu’s expression that was visible.

A mix of regret, fear, and sorrow was written all over his face.

Even his fingertips trembled slightly at the thought of navigating such a terrifying wedding hall.

Then—

Clap!

Jiseon stepped forward and quietly spoke:

—You bring him in.

“Huh? What about you, Mom?”

—I've proven myself enough. What's there to be afraid of? I'll go alone, bride's entrance!

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 379: The Host (5)

The Lone Bride's Entrance

In Earth's wedding venues, it's not an uncommon sight.

But today, wasn't the story a little different?

This ceremony was a cosmic agreement ritual.

Moreover, the guests were bound to consist of villains from across the universe and greedy businessmen.

"The guests might test your composure and courage. Are you sure you'll be fine on your own? You do know what kind of people I invited, don't you?"

For instance, the King of Ten Thousand Demons, Mara, might exude such overwhelming might that the bride won't even be able to take a single step forward.

—So, are we really sending that guy out there alone?

Swoosh.

Jiseon, quietly listening to Yeongwoo's words, points her finger toward Jeonggu.

"....."

With this, Yeongwoo could only agree.

"Well, fair enough."

Kim Jeonggu

The Strongest Sword of Dobong.

Though he was the biological father of Jeong Yeongwoo, the Greatest Sword of the Korean Peninsula, Jeonggu's cosmic knowledge was abysmally lacking.

Thus, there was no way someone like him could endure the guests' malicious mental assaults.

‘But... isn’t Father also Jeonggu Before the Typhoon?’

Yeongwoo suddenly recalled the “Jeonggu card” he saw during the negotiation table with Yuto, the Swordmaster of Tokyo.

[Jeonggu Before the Typhoon]

"Jeonggu is still alive. The mysteries of the universe protect him."

| Card Rank: Legendary

| Power: 1,000

Suspicious Straw

<Always wins against cards of the same rank. However, it loses to all other cards.>

It was hard to see this as just a game card.

The way it perfectly encapsulated the characteristics of “real” people, like illegitimate heirs and corporate chairmen, was proof enough.

In other words, the effect of the “Jeonggu Before the Typhoon” card likely reflected Jeonggu’s real-life abilities to a significant degree.

‘Same rank... meaning he has an advantage against legendary-level opponents.’

Surprisingly, one of the representative legendary cards was Lemu.

[Desires of All, Remu]

"If you know everyone's desires, you can captivate everyone."

| Card Rank: Legendary

| Power: 900

An Offer You Can't Refuse

For some inexplicable reason, it suggested that Jeonggu might be relatively unscathed against someone at Lemu's level.

‘But why, though?’

Of course, one shouldn’t take card effects at face value.

But at least they provided a plausible basis.

‘Honestly, most of the unruly guests seem to be legendary-tier. So maybe it’s better to send Father alone after all.’

No matter the choice, it was a gamble.

After all, among today’s guests was Mara, the King of Ten Thousand Demons.

‘The Chairman might not actively threaten Father, but there’s no predicting what Mara will do.’

A figure who walked in the shadow of cosmic laws.

To him, even this ceremony might be nothing more than a passing amusement.

It was impossible to predict the level of threat he might pose to the participants.

‘In that case, we can only hope the Chairman takes the top spot in the contribution rankings and banishes Mara.’

Returning to the issue of the contribution rankings after much deliberation, Yeongwoo alternately looked at his parents and said:

"Then, let’s have Mother enter alone for now. But if the guests’ ranks are higher than expected, let Father go in instead."

—What?

"What? What are you talking about? If the guests are high-ranked, shouldn’t we be even more careful?"

Jeonggu exclaimed in alarm.

But Yeongwoo didn’t have the time to explain the card details.

"Do you think high-ranking figures would even care about someone as insignificant as Father? He looks too weak to be worth their attention."

After brushing off the concerns, Yeongwoo turned to Kubu, who blinked while standing nearby.

"Is there anything else we need to know? Anything at all?"

-The contribution rankings might cause unexpected issues... but for now, there's nothing more you need to be aware of.

Kubu, who perceived the rankings as a "problem," spoke cautiously.

But Yeongwoo wasn't particularly interested in that detail.

"Alright then. I think we're done for now. We can practice entering the ceremony venue after it's set up."

Scratching his chin, Yeongwoo scanned the landscape of Gwangjin District, prompting Jeonggu to approach with a worried expression.

"Y-Yeongwoo."

"Yes?"

"There's nothing else, right...?"

"Hmm. Who knows?"

At his father's question, Yeongwoo glanced at the clock.

Then he looked back at Kubu and gave instructions.

"The venue will arrive at 2:23 PM today. Check it out once it's set up."

-Understood. I'll take my leave now.

Swoosh.

Kubu disappeared, the void closing behind him.

Only then did Yeongwoo turn back to his father.

"For now, this should suffice."

"For now?"

"Yes. If there's anything else you'd like for the ceremony, let me know. Let's head back, have lunch, and return later."

"Lunch... what was supposed to happen after lunch again?"

Jeonggu, now visibly anxious, asked nervously.

"You've been relaxing for too long, haven't you? The Mutant is arriving in the afternoon."

"Oh."

At his son's remark, Jeonggu's mouth fell open in realization.

"And with a very high probability..."

Swoosh.

Yeongwoo pointed at the sky with his finger, prompting Jeonggu and Jiseon to look up.

"High probability?"

—What is it?

"With a very high probability, Uncle will be visiting Seoul today."

—Ah, that's right. That bastard should be arriving soon.

Jiseon couldn't help but have mixed feelings.

After all, Yeongwoo's second maternal uncle was also Jiseon's second older brother.

12:31 PM.

Yeongwoo, Jiseon, and Jeonggu gathered at what used to be a "restaurant" in Gangnam-gu to eat lunch.

The meal had been prepared by Taewon, and despite the reset world, they managed to enjoy a reasonably well-organized lunch.

At least proper utensils were available.

Of course, it wasn't a situation where a chef could mix ingredients to cook, so most of the food was instant meals.

—What's all this?

Jiseon, sitting across from Yeongwoo, pointed at the convenience store hamburger on the white plate and asked.

Yeongwoo jokingly mimed picking it up and asked back.

“Why, shall I cut it up for you?”

—No, I’m asking how you’ve managed to live your whole life eating junk like this.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

It was an understandable complaint from Jiseon's perspective.

She hadn’t been in this world for long and didn’t fully grasp the extent of the damage Earth had suffered due to the reset.

For instance, she didn’t know much about the petrification phenomenon that rendered most objects unusable.

“This is the best we can do. Right now, we can’t even light a gas stove.”

Because gas lines and electricity weren’t functioning.

—Not even the gas stove?

“Nope. The only time city utilities work is during the Grand Scale Service hours, and even then, it’s impossible to send people out due to the extreme weather. In short, the world is collapsing.”

With no way to produce even basic industrial goods, the world was, strictly speaking, in a terminal state.

—What’s the point of everything we’re doing, then? If we’re all just going to starve to death eventually?

“That’s not certain.”

—What?

“We don’t know exactly, but there is a city growth route and planet upgrades underway. If we can’t endure the reset, destruction is inevitable, but there’s surely a breakthrough somewhere.”

—What exactly is that breakthrough?

“We don’t know yet.”

Yeongwoo pushed his hamburger plate toward Jeonggu.

Jeonggu glanced at Yeongwoo for permission before sliding the hamburger onto his empty plate.

“One way or another, we’ll either stop the reset or find a way to alter its trial form. If not...”

—If not, then what?

“We’ll have no choice but to build a massive spaceship and migrate to another planet. Of course, I hope it won’t come to that.”

Yeongwoo’s goal of installing the "Pioneering Statue" from the Returnee’s Chamber here on Earth was for that very reason.

If the Earth itself could be transformed into a spaceship, humanity could be relocated effortlessly.

“By the way, what kind of person is my second uncle?”

When Yeongwoo shifted the topic to Jinhyeon, Jiseon, who had been staring intently at her hamburger plate, suddenly reached under her helmet.

Click.

She unlocked the strap.

“...!”

“Huh?”

For the first time since arriving on Earth, Jiseon began to take off her helmet.

—Song Jungho. He’s a real pain in the ass.

Shhh.

She slowly removed her helmet with one hand, revealing the true face of Song Jiseon, hidden beneath the thick steel armor.

“Ji... Jiseon—no, ma’am? You were really a person?”

“What? So you didn’t have a lizard face after all?”

—What nonsense are you talking about, you idiots?

Song Jiseon.

The youngest daughter of Jinhyeon Group, ranked second in Korea's corporate hierarchy, and the so-called "Iron-Blooded Empress" who had overtaken her brothers to seize the chairman's position.

Her face, surprisingly, remained as it had been just before the reset.

The only differences were that her skin was paler than it had been as a human, and her flowing, mane-like long hair was now white.

However, her distinct sharp eyes and features remained so intact that even Yeongwoo, who had only known her from news and newspapers, recognized her instantly.

"If you didn't have a lizard face, why did you bother wearing the helmet all the time?"

When Yeongwoo asked out of genuine curiosity, Jiseon picked up the hamburger with her armored fingers.

After hesitating for a moment, she took a big bite and frowned deeply.

—Why do you think? I returned to a world where I don't know what might hit me at any moment.

A world where the masses had hunted her with karma points.

Though she had become a dragon, returning to a world filled with hostility toward her had understandably put Jiseon on edge.

"Oh, so the fact that you're taking off the helmet now means..."

As Yeongwoo smiled mischievously, ready to tease his mother, Jiseon bared her teeth, revealing blue veins beneath her skin.

—Shut up, you trashy brat. You think I'd eat with the helmet still on?

"Yes, yes. Please, enjoy your meal."

Yeongwoo waved his hand dismissively, knowing all too well that her words didn't match her true feelings.

'Finally, I've managed to get her to take that cursed helmet off.'

Perhaps a part of the ironclad defenses in her heart had been unlocked.

And that would greatly contribute to:

[Family: Restoration of Roots]

| Complete the following three tasks. (1/3)

- Find a mother and a father.
- Reunite your parents.
- Be blessed by your complete parents.

This was critical to fulfilling the family achievement, Root Restoration.

Reuniting the parents should be solved by this wedding.

But as for being “complete parents”...

It was the final condition of the family achievement.

This clearly referred to parents who were proper in every sense—legally, biologically, and emotionally.

Thus, to make Song Jiseon a complete mother, they would need to become a proper family.

The same applied to Jeonggu, who was already on his second hamburger.

“Dad, you’ll need to come with me to Gwangjin-gu at 1 PM.”

“Huh? Me? Why?”

“You should at least meet my second uncle. We’re about to hold a wedding.”

“Ah, right. I should meet him.”

Moreover, Jinhyeon’s second son, Song Jungho, was the final witness required for the ceremony.

“Having everyone involved in the marriage present will make the persuasion easier, don’t you think?”

“Yeongwoo... I don’t think this is going to be easy at all.”

“Even if it’s not, we’ll make it happen.”

They had come too far to be stopped by a single second uncle.

“I’ll make sure he stands at the altar.”

As Yeongwoo made this bold declaration while fiddling with the edge of his hamburger plate, an ominous energy erupted above the restaurant ceiling.

Boom!

“What’s that?”

Jeonggu sprang up from his seat.

Jiseon, too, slowly raised her head as she put her helmet back on.

—It’s a dragon.

Yeongwoo stood, lifting Aratubank, and said:

“No, it’s our new family member.”

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 380: A New Family (1)

Song Jungho, the second son of the Jinhyeon family.

This man, whom Yeongwoo wished to welcome as new family, made an entrance as grandiose as the rest of the Jinhyeon family.

—I am...! The true master of Jinhyeon, Song Jungho! Today, I’ve returned from hell to judge your sins!

Rumble!

Thunder rolled in accompaniment to his pompous declaration.

At this, Yeongwoo scratched his chin with the end of Bastard and commented to his mother.

“...This uncle is a bit over the top.”

—He's always been like that.

“By the way, how many masters does Jinhyeon even have? They all claim to be the one.”

—What are you talking about? Of course, the real master of Jinhyeon is...

Jiseon, who was about to spout a similar Jinhyeon-esque line as her brother, clamped her mouth shut at the last moment.

Meanwhile, Song Jungho's thunderous voice echoed from the sky, seeking an opponent.

—Who dares to challenge me? Name yourself, brave one!

It was a typical confrontation among dragons.

Song Jungho, the second son of the Jinhyeon family, had also returned to Earth, receiving the identity and body of a dragon.

‘Hmm, is it my turn now?’

As Yeongwoo stood up, drawing Bastard in response to his second uncle's call, an unexpected event occurred.

Sssshhh!

Suddenly, Jiseon, seated opposite him, slammed her fist on the dining table, rose, and thrust an ice greatsword through the dining room ceiling.

Crash!

—The true master of Jinhyeon, Song Jiseon, is here...!

“Wha... What?”

As Yeongwoo widened his eyes at the unexpected turn of events, a startled voice also came from above Seoul's skyline.

—What... wh-who?

Even Song Jungho, who had returned furious after being voted into oblivion, hadn't anticipated that his younger sister would be in Seoul ahead of him.

—You moron. If you got sniped, you should've stayed dead instead of choosing to mutate.

As Jiseon scolded him, practically a senior among mutants, Song Jungho regained his composure and retaliated with curses.

—You crazy bitch? Fine, let's settle the fight we didn't finish in our past lives!

Jiseon smirked derisively.

—What are you talking about? I already won that fight ages ago. If you're still unsure, tell me—who's the current chairman of Jinhyeon?

“—You bitch...!”

It was truly an unsightly quarrel.

And to make matters worse, this entire exchange was being broadcast across Seoul.

“.....”

Yeongwoo, watching his mother and uncle argue disgracefully, eventually placed his Bastard sword back on the table and spoke.

“What are you two doing? This is my fight. Mom might be the chairman of Jinhyeon, but I'm the mayor of Seoul.”

Strictly speaking, Song Jungho, who was in the sky, was a guest of the mayor of Seoul.

After all, he was a mutant attempting to invade Seoul.

—What? How is this your fight? This is a family matter.

“Have you forgotten, Mom? You're part of my family now. That makes Song Jungho my uncle, my family too.”

—Not yet.

“What?”

—I haven't married your father yet.

“Seriously...”

Jiseon probably knew she was being unreasonable.

But her hatred for her second brother, Song Jungho, was so intense that she found herself being uncharacteristically petty.

“What are you even trying to do?”

—I’m going to beat Song Jungho. You just stand back and watch.

With that, Jiseon stormed out of the dining room and shouted.

Crash!

—Song Jungho! Show me your mark! I’ll remind you why I became the master of Jinhyeon!

As a current dragon, Jiseon clearly understood the ways of dragons.

Realizing that Jiseon was also a dragon, Song Jungho tensed up and responded in a more cautious tone.

—Oh, really...? Fine, let’s settle this with a duel of swords!

Boom!

Thunder rumbled across Seoul’s skyline again.

Then, a blinding bolt of lightning struck Jiseon outside the restaurant.

Crack!

“D-dear!”

Startled, Jeonggu dashed toward the restaurant entrance, but Yeongwoo stopped him by grabbing his shoulder.

“She just received the mark. Don’t bother her, or she’ll hit you too. She’s in a pretty ferocious mood right now.”

“What? But still...”

As Jeonggu hesitated, looking unsettled, Yeongwoo picked up Bastard and stepped outside the restaurant.

A swirling storm of white lightning twisted and churned in the sky over Seoul.

‘...The scale is something else.’

Song Jungho, the second son of Jinhyeon.

There was a reason he ranked below both his older brother and younger sister.

“Mom, will you be okay? Mutation appearance order usually correlates with...”

—Shut up. Stop talking nonsense.

“....”

Sensing his mother’s fiery temper, Yeongwoo wisely kept silent and took a step back.

Then, he pulled up an old accomplishment he had stored for some time.

Shine!

[Golden Tempest]

| Fulfill any four conditions to summon the golden rain. (2/4)

=When there are seven or more mutants nearby.

=When an entity with a head of state attribute dies.

-In North America.

-When two beings with #Chaebols and #Dragon attributes fight.

-When a 2nd-grade or higher otherworldly entity visits.

Among the four required conditions for completing the golden rain achievement, two had already been met.

And now, only three remained.

-In North America.

-When two beings with #Conglomerate and #Dragon attributes fight.

-When a 2nd-grade or higher otherworldly entity visits.

But now, one of them was about to be dealt with.

‘I always thought I’d have to pit them against each other eventually... If I solve it now, it’ll be easier and more convenient for me.’

Among the three remaining conditions, Yeongwoo was particularly focused on the dragon race battle.

-#Chaebols, #When two beings with dragon race attributes fight each other.

When he first saw this achievement, it was a daunting condition to figure out.

But now it seemed like one of those problems that would naturally resolve itself.

Both Song Jiseon and Song Jungho, who was up in the sky, had both the chaebol and dragon race attributes.

So, while they fought, simply summoning golden rain would fulfill another condition.

'By now, my brothers must have resumed the construction of the transit route... We should soon be able to reach North America in one go. The completion of the golden typhoon is also just around the corner.'

Though there was some noise here and there, everything was progressing smoothly.

From his parents' marriage to the golden rain achievement, and even the journey toward establishing the family.

—Wait, what's this guy? His presence just disappeared?

Jiseon, having just finished a conversation with her second brother, looked up at the now-quiet sky and muttered to herself.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

In response, Yeongwoo noticed the symbol on top of his mother's head.

「General」

"Since he's done what he needed to do, hasn't he just returned to standby mode? You'd probably know better, Mother. Still, I think..."

The current time was 12:46 PM.

There were about 14 minutes left until the regular appearance time of the mutants at 1 PM.

"He'll probably show up again in roughly 14 minutes. And this time, for an actual fight."

—So, what do we do in the meantime?

"What else?"

As Yeongwoo said this and turned his gaze toward the sky, where a new presence had emerged, a silver metallic object broke through the clouds and descended.

Judging by its direction, it seemed to be landing near Gwangjin District.

"We'll be tidying up the wreaths."

—Tidying up wreaths? Another one's here?

Yeongwoo pointed with his finger at the descending object, which was already almost out of sight.

"Yes. It seems the Mechanical Tower sent this wreath."

* * *

The Mechanical Tower

The base of Lemu, a fourth-tier being under cosmic law and a mysterious fortress dedicated to researching esoteric schematics.

Yeongwoo had never been to the Mechanical Tower and had no idea what it actually looked like.

But this time, he was about to get a glimpse of its essence.

"...Oh."

The wreath sent by Lemu to the Gwangjin District's wedding venue was unmistakably modeled after the Mechanical Tower.

'Lemu's CEO is definitely meticulous.'

To be honest, Yeongwoo liked this wreath the most among all the ones he'd received so far.

The first reason was that it automatically delivered itself to Gwangjin District while Yeongwoo was dining in a restaurant in Gangnam District.

The second reason was its striking appearance.

Whoooooosh...!

Lemu's wreath, emitting a low operational hum, stood 20 meters tall.

Its surface, like a cliff carved by waves, was sharply angular.

Upon closer inspection, it was composed of hundreds of smooth rectangular metal blocks rather than a single monolithic structure.

It made Yeongwoo wonder if the actual Mechanical Tower looked exactly like this.

—This looks more like a trophy than a wreath.

Jiseon, wielding an ice greatsword, approached Lemu's wreath.

"I think it's modeled directly after the Mechanical Tower. It seems like he still wants to get on good terms with me."

Yeongwoo felt that this wreath from Lemu was a gesture of reconciliation.

After all, showcasing the Mechanical Tower—even as a wreath—felt like an invitation to the tower itself.

"Right, there's no need to stay enemies with someone wealthy. Especially when he's the only one I know who can glimpse those schematics."

Of course, since the Chairman despised Lemu, openly befriending him wasn't an option.

But perhaps, given the chance, a secret meeting could be arranged.

'So, what kind of function does Lemu's wreath have?'

Just like the others, this wreath likely had its unique feature.

For example, Kwaya, the prison construction company, had sent a convict detector; Mara, the King of Ten Thousand Demons, had gifted a rival eliminator; and Dogo, the King of Destruction, had included a defense system and even a counterattack mechanism with his wreath.

What, then, had Lemu, the explorer, master of the Mechanical Tower, and architect, sent?

Tap.

Yeongwoo placed his hand on the surface of Lemu's wreath, bracing himself for a surprise.

But nothing happened.

'What? Did he seriously just send a model of the Mechanical Tower?'

Then what was the purpose of the operational hum coming from within the wreath?

—What's this? You don't know what it's for?

Jiseon, who had been observing Yeongwoo, tapped the surface of the wreath with her ice greatsword.

Suddenly, the components of the wreath disassembled and floated slightly into the air.

—Huh?

"What... what did you do?"

But that wasn't the main issue.

Whooooooooosh!

The wreath, now running more vigorously than before, projected an electronic circuit-like pattern onto the ground.

Flash!

In that instant, Yeongwoo caught a glimpse of something.

The buildings bordering the Gwangjin District lit up briefly before going dark again.

"What... was that just now?"

Yeongwoo already knew, even as he asked.

The wreath had momentarily powered all of Seoul.

"Hey... Hey, man! Try it again!"

Excited by this unbelievable phenomenon, Yeongwoo kicked the wreath with the tip of his shoe.

The wreath reassembled itself and displayed a small phrase.

Pop!

[|||-Moro-001-483-0548-20]

Moro?

Jiseon tilted her head at the phrase.

Yeongwoo swallowed hard before speaking.

"Coordinates."

—Coordinates?

"The Mechanical Tower's coordinates. CEO Lemu has sent an invitation that's hard to refuse."

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]